



Death Korps: Conscript

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DEATH KORPS Organizational Chart

Regiment = Commanded by a Kapitän the equivalent of a

Colonel in most Imperial Guard armies. As a whole a Regiment contains up to 1500 men.

Batallion = There are 2-5 Batallions in a Regiment, each commanded by a Major.

Kompanie = Every Batallion is divided into 2 Kompanies, each commanded by a Hauptmann.

Platoon = A Kompanie consists of several platoons, including infantry, armor, mechanized, heavy weapons and so on. Each platoon is commanded by a Leutnant known as a Lieutenant or Leftenant in other Guard armies.

Section = A section is the smallest component of a

Regiment and is commanded by a

Sergeant. Sections comes in a variety of

types. A Platoon might have four

sections of infantry, one sniper sectionand

one heavy weapon section for example. Other

guard armies refer to sections as squads.

Infantry Section = A standard 10 man infantry section is divided up into positions. Each position has a particular task. 1. Sergeant 2. Communications 3. Medic 4.-8. Trooper 9. Heavy Weapon. 10. Ammo Bearer.

Miscellaneous Ranks = Besides the above combat personnel a Death Korps Regiment has quartermasters, cooks, tech priests, Imperial adepts, priests, adjuncts, Commissars, and more, all with their own ranking system and role within the Regiment.

I

Wings of Fury


The alien perceived the village below with the utmost clarity. Through the tinted lenses of its ornately crested helmet, the being's already excellent vision was amplified even further. It could make out squat wooden houses with little brick chimneys emitting streamers of pallid gray smoke into the clear blue sky. It could discern the individual wood grains of the domiciles' dirty walls and it could see blades of grass shimmering a pleasant gold as the noonday sun shone upon the unawares village.

The alien's ears, like its eyes, were made all the more sensitive by the encompassing helm it wore. It could hear the wind sighing and the grass rustling, it could hear the inane murmurs of the village residents, their voices grating and rough to the alien's pointed ears. It could smell too. The alien regretted that. It could handle the sights and sounds of the village, but the smell turned its stomach. The stench of sweat, rotting meat, decomposing plant material, and excrement all blended together in a noxious aroma. The villagers, and their kind, by their very nature polluted everything they touched. Wherever they dwelt they used up the land, soiling it with their waste before moving on.

The alien let out a breath, partly in anger and partly to try and clear its nostrils of the village's stench. The alien could have let the helmet's respirator cycle out the smell of rot exuded by the villagers, but chose not to. Better to see, hear and most of all smell the creatures to best understand them. To best hate them.

The alien looked over its thin shoulder, and there crouched in the tall reeds of golden grass several of its kin in sky blue armor waited patiently. Their slim bodies were motionless while their wraithbone wings swayed gently.

As the alien gazed upon its brothers and sisters one of them tilted its head a fraction. The alien could feel the sensation of yearning from its kin. Not yet, the alien thought. The alien flexed its armored finger and a gesture of negative was quickly made. The alien was just as eager, but the time was not right. Soon. Not yet.


Atop the grassy hill the alien and its fellows waited. The sun slid across the horizon till long shadows cast by the village spread out upon the grass. The alien was prepared to wait for as long as it took. It remained still save for the gently swaying of its  fashioned wings. Perhaps the Farseer wished to wait for nightfall?

~I do not,~ came the mental caress. The Farseer's thoughts translated into words and as usual were soothing and gave a sense of calm to the alien. Perhaps having an understanding of the strands of fate brought with it a level of calm serenity the alien wondered.

~It does. Exarch, you and yours have waited enough. ~

The alien felt no discomfort at having its thoughts so easily read. The Farseer was so vastly important to their race's survival that it was an honor to hear her words, or rather feel them, through the psychic connection.

Slowly the alien stood and willed its wraithbone wings to extend. Feathers of the same material fluttered in a hue of many colors. Behind the alien, it could sense the others rising as well, eager to act. The alien did not need to speak; the others knew it was time.

Into the air the Exarch leapt and its wings flexed and pumped gracefully sending it into the quiet azure sky. The alien's winged form and that of the other Swooping Hawks lent their shadows to the grassland below. The Exarch floated above the village for a few moments, and then let itself fall. The alien s descent slowed as wraithbone wings extended, curving to catch pockets of air. With a thought, curved bulges on each of the

Exarch's outer armored thighs opened up to reveal slots. A hiss sounded from the chambers and glossy white spheres rained down upon the village. The Exarch heard similar hisses from its kin and could see blurs of white race past it towards the unsuspecting village below.

The ejected spheres hit the earth, the houses, and surrounding grasslands with dull thuds. Some spheres embedded in the ground, others bounced up, others rolled, in quick succession they all exploded. A series of sharp cracks echoed in the air blasting dirt, grass and wooden walls apart. A few screams joined the cacophony of noise as the explosive devices shredded the area beneath the descending Swooping Hawks in a storm of deadly and near invisible shrapnel.

In one gauntleted hand the Exarch held a slim lasblaster with a narrow barrel and a flared muzzle. High pitched screams emitted from it and deadly blasts rained upon the village.

The Exarch landed in what it imagined was the little town's main square. On all sides were small wooden houses, and what perhaps were shops. A squat stone statue of the Corpse God was perhaps the sturdiest thing in the entire settlement. The other aliens landed gracefully in a flurry of dust and ash about their Exarch.

Their weapons sang out, sending white hot light in a steady spray. Smoking holes lined the walls. Blasts chipped away at the statue and stung the earth with intense heat.

The humans began to scream in earnest now. Clumsy and dressed in crude, dull colors the humans in the village ran in wild panic. A few had been killed by the initial onslaught and their contorted bodies smoldered from the effects of the shrapnel and lasblaster shots. The Exarch was eager to see the whole village join them.

It leveled its lasblaster at a fleeing woman, who dragged behind her one of her young, bewildered brood. With a screaming sound, a dozen bright white lights flickered out of the weapon's muzzle and sent searing spears of energy stitching up the woman's leg, flanks, and back, sending her into the dirt with hardly a squawk. The child still held her hand and looked

dumbly at the ghostly smoke rising from the fatal wounds. Before a tear, or scream, or any emotion at all, could register with the child the Exarch willed its weapon to fire again.

The fight ended in a few minutes and was no challenge, but the Exarch did not care. It bore the armor of its temple, as had the Exarch before it, and before it, and so on. The Exarch was no longer an individual; it was the embodiment of the Swooping Hawk shrine. It was swift and unexpected destruction. It was shock and firepower. It was winged death. It was not a he, or a she. It was the essence of Swooping Hawk. It didn't even have a name anymore. The Exarch did not lust for a challenge. It killed in the manner proscribed by the Swooping Hawk shrine in the name of protecting its Craftworld. When it yearned, it yearned to kill the enemies of the Eldar, and it cared not how well its foe fought in return. The other Swooping Hawks were not Exarchs. They were individuals still. They lusted for a battle more worthy, more meaningful.

"They are all dead. Not one even raised arms against us. I do not understand why we have done this. These mon-keigh are not worth our time," one of the Swooping Hawk's voiced, his words carried and whispered out by devices inside his helm.

"Why? We are destruction from the sky. It is our sacred duty to bring death to the foes of the Eldar on wings of fury. That is all the why there is to it," the Exarch whispered in reply, its own voice devoid of passion. "They are mon-keigh. They must be exterminated for the survival of our kind. Be they soldiers or otherwise," the only emotion in the Exarch's voice was a tinge of hate when it said the word 'Mon-Keigh'.

In deference the other Swooping Hawk tilted his body slightly in a silent gesture of apology. The Exarch looked about at the smoking ruins of the village.

Grass was burning in places sending up patches of black smoke to taint the blue sky and the doors of the houses and shops hung upon torn asunder hinges. The statue of the Corpse-God lay toppled and shattered into countless pieces. Each home was empty of life, each shop scoured. Men, women, children; all were dead. Some bodies were scattered about the

town having fallen in mid flight, others were dead in little familial clumps within their homes. Some had died in what they believed were hiding spots. The Eldar had discovered them. None survived. As it should be.

~I sense it is done,~ came the soothing tones of the distant Farseer.

The Exarch mentally agreed with the pleasant voice in its head and felt for a moment her eyes and its own joining. Through the Exarch's gaze the Farseer looked upon the destruction.

Her voice sung sweetly, ~You have done the sacred work of your shrine Exarch. I will show you another village not far off. Bring to it what you have brought here.~

Her presence left the Exarch's mind after leaving an exact imprint of where the next human settlement was. No doubt the Farseer had other Eldar to command and could not tarry long within the Exarch's psyche.

The Exarch's brethren were curious about this world and their purpose. The Exarch did not know why they had come to this human world. It did not know why the Farseer wanted the outlying and near defenseless habitats of the world exterminated, nor why the main city and vital spaceport were to be spared. It didn't care either. There was no "why" in its mind, only the desire to enact its sacred duties.

The Exarch flexed its wings and the other followers of its shrine did the same, sensing it was time to move. To the sky they took as the sun began to set. They were ready to unleash death upon wings of fury to another filthy den of humanity.

II

The Call

Achim Jagg leaned against the window of the transport as it rolled steadily down the transit hall. The window felt cold against his forehead and offered some relief to the stifling heat inside the vehicle. Through the window he could see slabs of rockcrete. Overly white light, shining from

glow rods above, bathed the monotonous scenery. From time to time Low Gothic letters and numerals could be seen on the rockcrete slabs, painted in brilliant yellow and indicating which transit hall they were travelling down. It had been the only change of scenery he had seen for the past six hours. Every once and awhile the transport would turn down another hall and the numbers would change. He tried to keep track of the numbers but gave up at forty-five.

"How long have we been going?" asked the young man sitting next to him. He was a scrawny youth, with bulging blue eyes and short blonde hair. A youth yes, though he couldn't be much younger than Jagg himself. If one got the Call, it came between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. He himself was seventeen as per the solar reckoning of Holy Terra which his world dutifully went by.

He rolled back the white sleeve of his shirt and glanced down at the worn chronometer he wore on his wrist. It had been seven tedious hours.

"Seven. We've been on this transport together seven hours, though it might as well have been seven years." Jagg had shared idle talk with the youth and in about an hour's time they had summarized one another's life and run out of things to discuss. Much the same had occurred throughout the transport. Two rows of benches seated two young men a piece. There were twenty five rows in the transport, and forty nine men. The third row was down a man. This he had counted and recounted out of boredom. He had devised in his mind numerous reasons why they were missing someone. Desertion came to mind, though that was unlikely. There were few places a person could hide if they wished to escape the Call. Sickness? Though also unlikely unless the missing man was literally being given his final rights by a confessor. Transferred was his best guess. If a man knew a rare skill or trade when the Call came, they sent you to a specialized schola. Techpriests, Medicae, skilled craftsmen and the like had to come from somewhere.

"No, I mean how long?" the youth asked. He tried to remember the youth's name, but in his own apprehension of their journey it had slipped from his memory. Something that began with a K perhaps?

"What?" was all he could manage and he shifted his weight upon the uncomfortable bench in an attempt to lean up against the window whose cold pane rattled, making it less than an ideal pillow.

"How long till we are there? They didn't say when we boarded at the assembly point. Why have us come from every level of the hive and then just transport us a thousand kilometers away? My mother could have just hired a transport and sent me to the..." the youth frowned for a moment and shut his mouth. His blue eyes became glassy.

He thought about his own mother briefly and sighed. She had seemed resigned when the Call came. She had expected it for three years and was well prepared for when it finally did arrive. Upon being alerted by the provost she had dutifully helped him pack, walked with him up a level and paid for a personal transport to deliver him to the assembly point, a terminal located almost topside thirteen levels above. Such a ticket was expensive but when the Call came, you went. She explained it was as simple as that. It was something every mother saved for, as part of her own duty to the world. He imagined the poorest could not afford such, but somehow they too must reach the assembly point to answer the Call.

Maybe they walk?

Who knew sitting could be so tiring?

"What?" the youth asked perplexed by Jagg's daydreaming being voiced aloud.

Clearing his throat he explained. "Poor citizens. Those in the lowest levels, or topside in the Rad. Their mothers don't pay for transports. They may even not have mothers, just wastrel mistresses. I wondered how they made it to the assembly point?" He could see the youth didn't much care and was still thinking about his own mother.

"Yeah, they walk," came a voice behind Jagg. A lanky youth with a hatchet face, and a too flat a nose, leaned up on the seat behind Jagg. He smelt as if he were emitting more than his own fair share of body odor.

"I got the Call and my ma said she wouldn't waste any of her ration card on me. She said I'd have to pay for a ride to the assembly point. Well," he smiled and spread his hands wide. The transport bounced and the young man balanced himself on the back of Jagg's bench.

"So what's a man to do? You don't make the Call I'm told you're shot on sight. Makes sense I guess. Ever see a young male ganger eh?"

He had never seen a ganger period. He heard stories enough, mostly involving crazy women and broken down old men with similar tattoos and drug habits.

"So you walked?" he asked with a raise of a brow.

"Yep. I think they send the Call giving you just enough time to make it on foot from wherever you are. To be honest, I bet the marching will be easier on me than you two. Besides, you don't know how many short trips, free meals, and free drinks I got along the way. Oh! Callum is my name." He struck out his hand. It was dirty.

Jagg awkwardly turned in his seat and shook Callum's hand despite the grime. It was a coarse hand and the grip strong despite Callum's reedy appearance. He must have been about the same age as himself. The youth at his side shook Callum's hand as well.

"I'm Khuler and this here is Jagg. My mother is a data clerk for the..." the youth, who had so kindly reminded Jagg of his name, was cut off by a grunt from Callum.

"I know who your mother is. You've been whining about her since this trip began. My mother is a waitress on level fifty two. So, I bet I know what your fathers do!" Callum said loudly.

They all laughed.

The journey ended just as Callum's joke reached everyone's ears in the transport. The hefty vehicle turned down a transit hall and into a massive chamber. Bright lights shone from above but also from metal posts at ground level. From his viewpoint Jagg could make out fences, razor wire, and rockcrete buildings. Some buildings were as tall as an entire level. They were the most massive structures he had ever seen. They all looked similar however, with only height and a few painted numbers on their walls to mark them apart.

Soldiers in dark charcoal uniforms marched by while worn and multi wheeled transports drove into what looked like a cavernous garage. They were men! He had not seen a healthy man in ages. He looked upon them in wonder. The bright artificial light from above faded as the transport trundled into the bay. The lights were dim and Jagg could see tooling shops, mechanics, and a variety of vehicles in various conditions, ranging from, running, to stripped down to the bare frames.

Everyone, Jagg included, pressed to the windows and eyed the men in uniforms. Many had not seen healthy men in years. Some had no memory at all of what a man in his twenties or thirties even looked like. Aside from Techpriests and the occasional Ecclesiastics or Imperial functionary, men were a rarity to those within the Hive.

The unpleasant and thoroughly unattractive woman who was driving their transport leaned over in her seat and pulled a lever with a meaty hand. With a squeal the door on the side of the transport opened up and the vehicle halted jarringly. Cool stale air rushed in and a general murmur rippled through the transport as everyone began to stand and reach up for the matt gray overhead compartments to fetch their belongings. It was an instinctive motion.

"SIT YOUR ASSES DOWN!" came a bellowing roar. The young men froze. Except for Callum, who sat down swiftly.

Standing at the head of the transport was a man. No youth, nor broken down veteran, nor Imperial functionary. It was a real Man of Krieg. He was tall, or in Jagg's eyes appeared so, and his shoulders were broad. He

wore a charcoal uniform that consisted of a tunic and pants that flared out. His boots were knee high and polished to a black and glossy sheen. Upon his shaved head he wore a cap, the same color as his uniform and at his side wore a black holster where a weapon sat secure. The man's face was clean shaven, but crossed with scars, and his left cheek was an open old wound permanently exposing the bone white of teeth. From beneath the brim of the man's cap brown and intense eyes stared out at the pack of frozen youths.

Jagg had seen vid-picts, been schooled by the schola marms, and even seen old images of his father that his mother kept; yet the sight of a real soldier so worn, so intense and so battle scarred floored him. He had never actually seen a weapon either. The men of Krieg needed them, and if you weren't in the Korps, you weren't wielding a weapon. Again at schola they had taught everyone the theory of weaponry, how to use them, clean them and so on. Preparing even toddlers for the day they would receive the Call and take up arms in the name of Krieg. The real thing however caught his eye.

The Man of Krieg slid the weapon out from its black holster, as if he noticed Jagg's fascination and held it aloft. It was an ancient pattern revolver. The firearm was crafted from dark metal, bore a cylinder that held six slugs and had a plain brown grip. The man's thumb reached up and cocked back the hammer and in one quick motion he pulled the trigger. The bang echoed in the transport and put a hole in the roof. Light shone from above through the bullet hole and smoke roiled up from the weapon.

The youths all sat back down in a rush, and some screamed, having never realized what an actual weapon sounded like. Jagg flinched, surprised as the rest as to how loud it was. The vid-picts always made it sound as if lasguns, bolters, and the like were loud, but not ear ringingly so. Perhaps it was only the ancient slug throwers that were that way?

The driver of the transport rolled her eyes and rose, shutting off the gurgling motor of the machine with the press of a button. She eased her bulk out of the driver's seat and waddled down the three steps and out of the vehicle. Meanwhile, the Man of Krieg walked up the aisle, his weapon

still held in his hand, his thumb moving mechanically to cock the hammer back. Click.

"You have answered the Call. You, like your fathers, and your fathers' fathers have the honor and holy duty to take up arms in the name of our sinful world. You are from this moment on Conscripts of the Death Korps of Krieg." His voice was grating and he spoke like a magistrate issuing out a life sentence. In a way he was doing just that.

As he walked the brown and fury filled eyes of the Man of Krieg looked out over the youths and his exposed teeth clacked gruesomely. He made it to the end of the transport turned and walked back towards the doorway, revolver still in hand.

"You will not do anything without being ordered to. Failure to do so is treason. The Korps has no room for traitors. No second chances. Our world failed in its God-Emperor duty in the year 433 of the fortieth millennia. You know well that date! THIS is the second chance! Here now, at the end of the forty-first millennia. You will sit in silence. That is all," the man said as he exited the transport, returning the weapon to its holster.

Jagg and Khuler sat stock still. Khuler's eyes were wide and had gone glassy again. No doubt he was thinking about his mother. He wanted to see what Callum was up to, but dared not turn around. He sat still and did what everyone on the transport did; he contemplated in fear induced silence.

From the moment he could walk, he had known this moment would come. His world was a cursed one. Years and years before his birth Krieg had ended a civil war, a civil war which had gone on five centuries before that. Supposedly before the war Krieg was lush and forested. He reasoned that was perhaps not true and that Krieg had always been a world of subterranean hives and a few outposts on the radioactive surface. The schola marms at times contradicted one another and he had discovered early on that asking questions did not endear one to them, or any figure of authority for that matter.

The story went that the servants of the Emperor had triumphed against "the enemy" and that was why Krieg had no men. For their crime of

allowing civil war to happen in the first place every Man of Krieg joined the Death Korps and went off to war. The majority fought, the skilled labored, and the weak perished. It was why Jagg had never met his father. His father, like so many others, was a man who fought.

The youths were silent on the transport. A few sniffled. A few coughed. No one moved, and only the most foolhardy risked glances out the window. Jagg felt himself clever for only letting his eyes look, and not turning his head. Outside he saw other transports. The wheeled monstrosities appeared empty. A few would depart the garage into the false light of the military compound, no others arrived.

His buttocks felt sore, and he wanted to twist in his seat, or stretch out his legs. Just thinking about having sat for so long in the same position made an increasingly uncomfortable sensation of tightness within his knees. He could hear amongst the coughs, sneezes, sniffles and light grumbles, the sound of boots shuffling along the metal transport floor. How long would they have to wait?

Krieg did not have day or night cycles. The artificial lights of the subterranean levels radiated at all times. Indoors people adjusted lighting according to their work schedules. Thus all he had to judge time by was his chronometer which ticked steadily upon his wrist.

"How long?" Khuler whispered.

Oh God-Emperor no! Jagg thought. "Shh," he whispered.

"I'm just saying, maybe he forgot we are here? I need to use the toilet. It's been what, eight hours by now? Longer. I'm hungry, thirsty, and I need to use the toilet. Do they want us to just make a mess?" Khuler kept his whining to a low pitch, but nearby youths glared at him and a steady "Shh" came forth from the transport's occupants.

Judging by the fetid smell he guessed some had indeed made a mess of themselves already. He himself felt fullness in his bladder that merged quite well with his pained knees and sore flanks. Silently he cursed Khuler

for bringing up the toilet. Just thinking about it made the urge to urinate stronger.

Khuler's whining continued and deep down Jagg hoped that the boy's complaints would bring the Man of Krieg thundering back into the transport. It didn't. The boy moped, and he felt a deepening discomfort settle over him. He was almost thankful when he felt something wet touch his thigh. Unable to hold it in, Khuler had wet himself.

Jagg held, held as long as he could, but feeling Khuler's urine against him, made the urge stronger. He shut his eyes.

The boy sniffled but he nearly laughed. If he had to go, best joke about it.

"If you go so can I," he whispered. It was disgusting, but it was total relief. He wet himself, feeling the hot urine along his leg and quickly smelling it as its stench mixed with that of the others in the transport.

"You two reek," whispered Callum. The wiry young man however didn't lean over their seat this time. Several laughs echoed throughout the transport followed by a rippling and intense "Shhh!"

"No more than you Callum," Jagg retorted with a wry smile.

"Yeah, yeah. When I piss myself, you two will know it!"

He nearly dozed off after that. The smell was bad, but as he lingered in it he naturally adjusted. He knew he and Khuler weren't the only ones who had wet themselves or worse, and the stench was something he could handle. He didn't have any food in his stomach to vomit up anyway. It wasn't as embarrassing when you weren't the first was his final thought before falling asleep.

Jagg woke with a start when the Man of Krieg returned. He looked as he remembered him; tall and frightening. The Man of Krieg sneered further, if that was possible with his ruined face, and his blazing eyes narrowed. His hand moved to the butt of his revolver and by then everyone was awake and alert on their bench.

"I smell piss," he hissed. The Man of Krieg strode slowly down the aisle and looked down at bench after bench, pausing at times to say again, "I smell piss. The piss of mother raised boys. Your fathers fight for Krieg's redemption and you piss yourselves before you've even left the transport?" At the end of the aisle he spun on his heel and his boot slammed the metal floorboard. The youths startled at the sound.

"I did not order the conscripts to piss. I have reviewed your files and none of you have serious learning disabilities. Or advantages I might add. None of you were reported by your scholas as lacking in hearing. Did I order any of you to piss yourselves?" he growled out and his exposed teeth clacked as if to emphasize the question.

When no one dared speak he drew the revolver again and said, "Did," his thumb rested on the cocking hammer. "I," then pulled it back with a resounding click. "Order," his weapon leveled at the boys to his side in the last bench on the right aisle. "You to piss yourself?"

The boys looked in total terror at the Man of Krieg and shook their heads no. Both shied from the pistol's muzzle. This did not dissuade the Man of Krieg from leaning towards them and placing a booted foot upon their bench.

"Say it," he said with a clack of his teeth.

"Nn...nn," one boy stammered and "No!" the other completed.

"No what?" The Man of Krieg prompted as his eyes like his weapon remained leveled on the boys.

Everyone in the reeking transport had turned in their benches to watch the event and a few started to cry. The younger ones Jagg noted, not that he himself didn't feel a rising fear in his throat, he just managed to keep tears and whimpers at bay.

He felt himself tremble as if the pistol was aimed at him. He had been taught about the Call, about the Death Korps, about war, but here he was, not even off the ride to the military compound and he was terrified. The

vid-picts, the schola marms, the old broken down men, the God Emperor's priests, even his mother couldn't adequately prepare him. Deep down he had hoped that the Call was akin to a great adventure. An adventure everyone's father embarked on and hoped his sons would join. Thus far there had been nothing great about his introduction to Krieg's adult males.

"No sir!" one of the boys shouted and almost smiled as if pleased with himself. His bench partner mimicked him.

"No sir! No!"

"Sir? Sir!? Do I look like a sir to you? I earn a ration card conscript. My name is Sergeant Hauster. If you insult me again I'll shoot you. Do you understand? Do you all understand?" the Man of Krieg removed his boot from the bench and glared out across the sea of frightened faces.

A mixed and disjointed chorus of "Yes Sergeant," or "Yes, Sergeant Hauster," sounded out from the transport's shaking occupants.

"The conscripts will rise. Those in the front bench on the right will leave the transport and then those on the left bench. Back and forth till all the Conscripts are off the transport and in two lines. Right and left." He paused and that was enough to get the young men moving.

Jagg watched as the first few benches cleared out. One of the conscripts paused to reach up for his belongings.

"Were you ordered to get your gear? Are you defying my order to disembark?!" Hauster yelled, his voice blasting through the transport as loudly as his revolver.

The youth staggered as if struck and his satchel from the overhead compartment fell on the empty bench. He shook his head and said, "No si- No Sergeant Hauster." And with that he left the transport forsaking his satchel.

When it was his turn to rise, Jagg and Khuler did so quickly abandoning what items they had brought from home. He felt cold liquid run down his

stiff leg and he felt a bit more embarrassed about his stained trousers. He wanted to wipe his hands off on something even though they weren't soiled but was afraid that any action might draw the eye of the Man of Krieg. Shuffling along he walked down the steps and out into cold refined air. He felt exhausted but thankful that his legs could stretch out and offer his tightened knees some relief.

The garage smelled of promethium, grease, and thanks to the conscripts, urine and sweat. He fell in file behind Khuler who sniffled and he heard Callum fall in behind him. The line wasn't exactly straight or still. It moved as people bumped into one another in restlessness. No one spoke per se, yet noise came from the young men anyway. Sniffing, coughs and muted murmurs directed at no one in particular arose from the collection.

Hauster exited the transport last and moved between the two lines of young men. He plucked at their shirts and sneered at their trousers. Each boy was different, each having worn whatever they chose to. Most wore simple clothing, but a few had on their Emperor's Ascension Day best as if they had hoped to make a good impression. As far as he could tell Hauster was disappointed with them all. It was as if he hated them all, but he could not fathom why. Was it because they were down a man? Because someone hadn't answered the Call?

"The God-Emperor has charged me with training you conscripts. You have answered the most holy of Calls, and will join the ranks of your fathers if you meet my expectations. Those who do not, will have their name sent to Commissar Shtall, Emperor help you."

Hauster moved to the head of the twin files and without glancing back said, "The conscripts will follow me and remain in their lines."

He shivered when Hauster mentioned the Commissar. Everyone knew what they were. They culled the faithless and cowards from the Imperial armies by whip, by shot and with brutal force. He knew he was faithful but shivered none the less. Thus far Hauster was the most frightening person he met, and Hauster had implied Shtall was somehow worse. That disturbed him.

The long line of conscripts walked with little coordination or rhythm out of the garage and into the bright false light of the military compound. Men in charcoal gray uniforms marched past in ranks that moved with a perfection Jagg believed impossible. Were they showing off just to impress the conscripts? To teach them?

Above, a sight he had only seen on vid-picts passed by. Twin turbine engines roared and the iron-gray military flyer passed overhead. The rumbling Vulture gun-ship banked heavily and landed atop one of the compound's many mammoth sized structures.

The conscripts walked past several grim fences of razor wire and along roads made from black rubberized material. While many of the compound's buildings were immense and foreboding, some were small squat affairs. Most of the buildings looked alike to Jagg, discounting size. They were square and dull gray in hue, their purpose unclear. A few sported glittering metal antennae or thick cables which ran to other buildings. All of the structures, both small and large bore Low Gothic numbers and letters painted in a vibrant yellow. The unadorned three level building he was led to bore the designation B-03.

The sounds within the subterranean military compound were strange. He could hear the droning engines of vehicles, the bawled out orders of soldiers, the occasional blurb from external voxes, as well as a distant rattling that he thought was perhaps weapons fire. Life within an underground hive was one of constant noise, bounced off the endless rockcrete walls.

The lines passed wearily into a wide open door on B-03's south side and into a large empty waiting room. The lights within, like those of the garage, were dim compared to the light 'outside'. Krieg's external lights were always overly bright, simulating a ceaseless day.

Hauster ordered them to strip down and any self-conscious shame was put aside as the sergeant put his hand back upon the butt of his pistol. A few tried to start conversations but the Man of Krieg clacked his teeth and

turned his scarred visage upon any who spoke, silencing them with but a quick gaze.

Naked and stinking the pale youths were rushed into a hallway and then through more doors. They passed by several men in charcoal uniforms who ignored them as if they didn't exist, as if the sight of forty nine naked filthy juves was a common occurrence in B-03.

Into a shower bay Hauster led them and simply said, "The conscripts have five minutes to get clean. The conscripts will then form a single line outside the shower. This line will be shoulder to shoulder." He put his hands on his hips and huffed through his ruined face.

When the youths hesitated he growled out, "Now!"

There were not enough shower heads for all of them and it was the quickest who turned on the dials and the strongest who were able to get the most clean.

Jagg, being neither the quickest, nor the strongest, had to settle with getting a partial spray down. He then had to make do by rubbing himself down on the outskirts of the competing boys. Water alone didn't clean them nearly enough, but it was better than nothing.

He and the rest ran to form a line the moment they saw Hauster outside the wet shower bay start to pace. A few had been quick thinking enough to turn off the showerheads, though one still sprayed, its water pattering the tiled floor behind the lined up conscripts. Being the only shower head still on, it stuck out in his mind as they lined up.

He mentally cursed. Surely letting the water run was some form of infraction. His fears were confirmed when Hauster paused in his pacing and halted in front of him. The man's brown fiery eyes bore down upon him and his broken face seemed to twist in place.

Without thinking he spoke, "Sorry Si-, Sergeant. I'll turn the water off." He turned to do just that when his world went white.

He found himself sprawled out on the floor just inside the wet shower bay. He saw water pooling by a clogged drain and mixed with the water something red and runny. Pain registered in his nose and he blinked away teary eyes before feeling his nose. It was sore and the slightest touch set his pain receptors off. He blinked and felt hot tears join rivulets of cold water upon his cheeks.

Hauster barked, "The conscript was not ordered to speak. The conscript was not ordered to fall out of line. The conscript was not ordered to think! Stand up. Now. NOW!"

Groggy from the day's events and the belt to his face Jagg weakly stood and returned to his place in line. He imagined that the line, which was rather compact, somehow widened so as to offer him room to return. Or perhaps it was rather to distance themselves from him.

"The conscript was ordered to strip down and has not. Is the conscript defying an order? Do we have here Krieg's guilt made manifest? This world was wracked by a holocaust of fire thanks to piss-soaked rats like you. People like you who couldn't follow orders. People like you who questioned the rules!" Hauster was nearly spitting in his face as he leaned in and clenched up his fist for another strike.

At a loss he shook his head, "No, Sergeant! I'm loyal! I'll follow orders! I will! I-"

The strike was somehow harder than the one before and came across his face more like a slap, then another came into his shoulder that sent him to the cold ground in a quaking heap. He tried to vomit, but had nothing to throw up and so he coughed up blood instead from where he had bitten his own lip. His face was already swelling and with visible effort he tried to stand. He heard Hauster's teeth clacking and speaking, but the words weren't making sense.

"The conscript was ordered to strip," Hauster repeated.

He wasn't sure he could stay conscious if the Man of Krieg hit him again. Tears stained his wet face and mixed with blood, he suddenly yearned for

his mother, as much as Khuler did. Strip. Strip? He looked down at himself unsure at first.

He looked at his left wrist. The chronometer was still there, fastened by a metal clasp. Hurriedly and with his heart racing Jagg detached the item and flung it away as if it were poison. At the rate Hauster was hitting him it might as well have been.

"Do you know why the surface of Krieg is a radioactive dump of mud conscript?" Hauster asked as he looked down momentarily at the discarded time piece then back to Jagg.

"The enemy, Sergeant. The enemy used atomics and defied the Emperor. The loyal men of Krieg survived though and won,"

He parroted his schola training the best he could, though in truth he doubted that the deadly, lifeless, muddy surface of Krieg was ever much more than that. The cities underground were simply too massive to believe that there had been a time on Krieg when its people didn't live beneath the earth.

"They teach you poorly conscript. The enemy did not use atomics. We did. It was better to scour the world. Our OWN world! To vaporize every tree and every rock, and poison the oceans than to let the enemy have it. It was the great turning point in the civil war you misguided slime. Had we not used that Dark Age technology upon our own planet, the enemy could have won. It is better conscript to die than to fail the Emperor. Better for a world to die than to let the enemy have it. We used atomics on ourselves! Do not think I will not use my revolver on your head if you give me cause. Obey my orders. Do not presume. Do not speak unless ordered to. Do not forget everything I tell you. You understand boy?" Hauster stepped back.

Used atomic on ourselves? Jagg couldn't fathom it. He had been taught the enemy used the forbidden weapons to try and destroy Krieg once they realized they could not win the insurrection. After the world's surface was ruined the loyal men of the Emperor had managed to survive by building underground bunkers. Supposedly from that moment on Krieg built downwards. Thanks to their unyielding faith the loyalist of Krieg

triumphed over the traitors. According to the schola marms, it was why Krieg was a wasteland topside.


"Yes, Sergeant!" he said his voice sounding nasal and gummed up from the blood that filled his nostrils.

Hauster said not another word and walked up and down the line till older men came into the shower room dressed in dark gray uniforms that bore a likeness to the sergeant's own garb. They were old and worn down men, gray and bent, used up. Men the likes Jagg had seen before in the hives. Soldiers who had not died in battle, who were better suited elsewhere, ended up back on Krieg. Not ex-soldiers exactly. There was no such thing in Krieg for the Death Korps was for life.

He had seen old men in the manufactorium, serving in the Cult of the Emperor, performing menial tasks within the hives, but he never imagined some would still be amongst the likes of Hauster and still wearing the uniforms of soldiers. On Krieg the men left the raising of children almost exclusively to women. The young men fought, the women aided them by working and preparing the next generation for the Call. Old men, broken down men, assisted in work, occasionally chatted with the young; inspiring them for the day they answered the Call. The old men of Krieg died for the most part quietly. Like many things on Krieg it was just the way it was, everyone had a purpose.

Upon closer inspection the older men here seemed still strong, and somehow big. Much bigger than the bent and graying shapes he had seen in the hive. They had silvery short hair, and wore no head gear. In their hands they held clippers and in the pockets of their uniforms sported other utensils of hair care. Down the line the old men moved and roughly grabbed the heads of the conscripts. Jagg found himself held still by calloused liver spotted hands as an old man stood before him. The clippers buzzed to life and in long strokes he could feel his hair being shaved off by a blocky ancient whose face looked twisted up with wrinkles as well as scars. Black strands and hunks of hair fell about his bare feet and soon his head felt colder than the rest of his body as he was shaved bald. Glancing left and right he saw a line of slightly bent bald heads. A few were rubbing

their pale scalps and Jagg himself touched at his own. The cut was close, but he could still feel prickly stubble upon his head.

"The conscripts will march in single file out that door. They will move down the hall till the Quartermaster halts them,"  Hauster ordered.

Needing no further encouragement the bald conscripts shuffled out of the shower bay naked, shivering, sore, cold, hungry, not truly clean and in his own case beat up.

"You alright?" someone whispered behind him as they marched through the door Hauster indicated.

He didn't look back, but nodded, though it was a lie. He was anything but alright. They must have done something 'wrong' before they even got to the compound to receive such treatment and he was still pondering Hauster's revelation about Krieg's past. What if Hauster was wrong though? Not that he would ever dream of questioning the sergeant on his claims.

"I'm Raous. Kellen is my given name, but I guess it's just like at schola. We all go by last. Well not me! Sorry I shuffled away from you there. Thought that Hauster fellow was going to put a slug in your head. Nothing personal you understand. I just have this thing about blood," the voice behind Jagg whispered in a hurry.

He tilted his head slightly, but risked too quick of a glance to make out more of Raous than a bald head and short stature. Jagg sniffled and wiped his hand across his bleeding nose and lip.

"Thing against blood?" he mumbled.

"Yeah, I don't like mine being spilt and don't like wearing that of others," the youth said.

"Fair enough," he countered, smiling once despite the pain. He came to a halt as the boy in front of him stopped abruptly. It was cold and he wrapped his arms about himself, running his hands along his limbs to try and generate warmth. He shivered in place and tried to fight back the rising pain in his face. He and several others tried to look to the front of the line to see what to expect but with little luck. No one wanted to do something wrong, most of all he didn't want to be the one to fail, and so they were silent as they waited.

The queue shuffled ahead gradually and at one point Hauster marched past them. He kept himself still and even lowered his hands to his side and did

his best to arrest his shaking. Fortunately Hauster moved down the hallway without so much as a glance his way.

The line moved along until he could see it led past a set of doors. Inside he could make out a table and hear voices. Or rather one loud voice. What the voice was saying wasn't clear and when he finally thought he could make out what was being said ahead of time, it was too late as he was next.

Into a room that smelled of wet and putrid fabric he entered. The room had a desk and behind it was an aisle and stacked on either side of it were metal holding trays. The trays were full of dull gray attire. Apparently this was the source of the new and unpleasant smell.

The man seated at the desk was younger, but not what he expected as an ideal Man of Krieg. He was portly for one. His jowls and neck were layered with jiggling fat. His eyes were almost porcine and the cap upon his head barely fit. The smudge beneath his broad nose he assumed was some form of moustache. Though it looked like a black streak of grease more than hair.

"Ah, look at you. Sergeant already had to emphasize an order did he? Ahh well. Worry not boy, it's only going to get worse." The fat man belched and leaned back in his seat, calling out, "Size, medium."

A servitor in the gloom of the storage aisle scuttled about on tracked feet and mindlessly grabbed this and that from the stacked trays. It hummed and bounced on weak motors as it trundled up and set a stash of items upon the metal desk. The face of the servitor was blank, its eyes and mouth having been replaced by rusty metal implants. Jagg was never comfortable around the things which had once been men. The mentally weak, the criminal, and the simply unlucky were sentenced to life as a servitor. It was a mindless hell he deeply dreaded. Upon completing its task the servitor turned on its tracked feet and whizzed back down the aisle ready for the next set of orders.

"Ahhhhh, right. Three pairs of underwear in a fashionable too oft washed white. Three pairs of socks, a lovely black pallor here. One set of combat fatigues, including gray tunic and trousers. Quite lovely. One set of boots.

Might need a shine there. Best do that boy lest Hauster gives you some more of his attention! One conscript cap, one Imperial Guard Mars Alpha pattern shell combat helm. Some lovely webbing. Your re-breather kit. Personal med-kit. One gray blanket. One satchel. One nine-seventy entrenching shovel, some mess kit, and ahhhh look at this!"

The fat man's fingers spread out the items one by one displaying them to Jagg as if he had bought them with a ration card. The item the obese soldier was waving his hand over was a little worn book, small enough to fit in a tunic pocket.

"The Infantryman's Uplifting Primer, Krieg edition my boy. Might just save you if you bother to look at it." The pudgy fingers tapped the book's flimsy cover which bore its title in Low Gothic and a golden Aquila that had seen better days.

The Quartermaster said, "Read this and take the test in the back and you don't have to do your eight weeks of training here."

His eyes lit up a moment, but not for long as he saw the sarcastic smile break out across the quartermaster's face.

He said nothing, collected his belongings and sniffled as the taunting quartermaster gestured for him to exit through an open door on the other end of the storage room.

Jagg had difficulty balancing his many belongings and he almost stopped to ask about a weapon. It seemed odd to be issued everything but a weapon. Hauster however, had told, or rather ordered, him to assume nothing and so he forced himself to not assume that he needed to be issued a weapon then and there. Into yet another room he walked and found it full of those who had come before him. There were benches and piles of clothes. Young men were getting dressed, but also swapping clothing. It reminded Jagg of a low level market bazaar with merchants and customers haggling back and forth.

"Hey! Jagg, over here. I bet my tunic will fit better on you. Trade?" came Callum's voice from the mass.

He made his way over and knelt to set his belongings down. Callum looked strange with his pale shaved head and he noted a few scars upon Callum's body.

Callum grinned once and patted his arm as he noticed Jagg's look.

"Rough on my level. Some old wreck gave it to me. Bet in his glory days I'd have worse from him. Trade?" he held out his tunic and Jagg nodded.

The rest of the forty nine young men entered the dressing room and swapped and traded out their musty uniforms. No one was completely happy with their kit. He was sure his own had been worn before, and reworn, destroyed, and reworn yet again. His issued garb had the feel of something unstable, as if at any moment it might tear at the seams and fall off from even the slightest of wear. A glance to the rest of the conscripts revealed to him that though the uniforms they all wore were in poor condition, the iron gray tones did at least give them a more soldier-like appearance. Never mind that no one was sure how to don their web gear or how to arrange their blankets, nine-seventies, and so on.

A few had put on their combat helmets, gray shell shaped things. Others had on their caps. Some kept their bald heads bare.

Callum, Jagg and Khuler had gravitated together, as well as the short boy who had spoken to Jagg when they left the shower, Kellen Raous. The short fellow looked similar to the rest of them, thin and bald with only green eyes as being distinct. He had also been the only one to give his first name. It was customary to address everyone by their last names, and use the given name only amongst close friends or one's mother. Kellen seemed to not mind breaking with formality.

"You know, I know we are all getting dressed, but that Hauster wasn't in here when we came in. Think he ordered us to dress?" Kellen asked, almost cheerily despite the fact that they had all ample evidence that breaking Hauster's orders or misinterpreting them was bad for one's health.

"I-I heard him. I came in and he was-was saying to get dressed. I don't know what that means. Think we should put our helmets on like them?" Khuler stuttered nervously and gestured to some older youths who had opted to fasten on their gray shell shaped combat helms.

"No way. Unless we are going right into combat, I don't think we should put on combat helmets. Caps will do. Looks like most of us here are thinking the same way. Better that if we do break a rule, that we break it all together. Look what Jagg got for his individual error," Callum nudged him with a smile.

His face still hurt, but a joke was something nice to hear despite it, it lessened the tension if only a fraction.

"You all could have put on chronometers and saved me. Or joined me at the very least in a thrashing," he sighed and looked at the majority of his fellow conscripts. Some were trying to fasten on their webbing, some lacing up their boots. A few were still trading clothes. A thought then came to him.

"The Uplifting Primer," he said and knelt to fetch it from his itchy blanket where he had wrapped the little book up.

"There is no test in the back. I looked. I think he was lying, but why do that?" Khuler whined and looked about hesitantly. He missed the fact that Kellen Raous and Callum were rolling their eyes.

"No, not that. I mean this Uplifting Primer, it's supposed to tell us what to do isn't it?" Jagg thumbed through the book and looked for a section on how to dress. He was not an excellent reader but the book was simple and thankfully had plenty of pictures. A quick scan revealed that the Primer included sections on proper dress.

"Here, look," Jagg said and rubbed his still weeping nose, causing a few drops of blood to dash along the book's yellowed pages.

The four of them peered over him to look at the book and saw that standard dress in a non-combat situation was underwear, fatigues, boots

and cap. There was no mention of webbing, the shovel, or any other equipment. Hurriedly the four did their best to mimic the images in the Primer leaving leftover gear wrapped up in their blankets. Not long after he noticed others were looking at them and soon copying. The older youths already in web gear and combat helmets made no move to change their attire. They were apparently confident they had passed what was turning out to be some sort of test. One amongst the elders even gave him a cruel smile and sad shake of his head.

A door opened and Hauster strode in, his eyes in no way dulled by his time away from his charges; they still burned. He looked about the room and everyone grew silent and stood still fearful of the man. Hauster did not speak for a few moments that felt like hours and when he did it was quiet, yet somehow traveled throughout the dressing chamber.

"The conscripts were ordered to dress themselves. For you idiots who know how to read that little book you were issued is not just for toilet adventures. For you slack jawed, mother raised, feminine louts who can't read, the book has pictures."

Hauster walked in amongst the forty nine boys and shook his head angrily at those who had put on webbing, helms, or anything else not mentioned in the Infantryman's Uplifting Primer's standard dress for non-combat situations. It was fortunate that only a few received his baleful look and most of those that did were the older boys, who refused to conform once they had made their own minds up.

For the first time he felt pride. It was a much better feeling than fear, exhaustion, soreness, hunger and thirst which all afflicted him. He and most of the others had done something right, despite Hauster's berating most of them had dressed correctly. He almost smiled.

"Despite the Ministorium creating for Krieg a customized Primer, complete with images, with written instructions on the finest of parchments, penned with clear and durable ink, I see that some of you are dressed for war. Yet if you read your damn Primers you will promptly note that we are not in a warzone! You are in a non-combat situation. Thank the

Emperor for that! If we were in combat I'd shoot you myself and save the foe the trouble!" The Sergeant's teeth clacked as he spoke.

Whatever smile upon Jagg's split lip that was about to form died as Hauster boomed, "You aren't fit for war! You aren't worthy of that most holy duty! Your fathers would be shamed at the thought of you at their sides. Your mothers, whom you are all no doubt pining over, would disown you were they to know how painfully stupid you are. Sit on the transport. Get out of the transport. Strip. Shower. Get dressed. Quite simple one would think. But no! You can't figure it out. For your blatant stupidity and inability to glance at pictures in a book you are going to get a little taste of war. The conscripts will exit the room through there."

He pointed at yet another door and continued, "The conscripts will sit in the chairs. The conscripts will not move till ordered to do so. You will then be following me to your barracks for some ill deserved rest. You will not be fed. Ask them why," he gestured to the elder boys in full combat attire.

"That isn't fair! We did it right. Just hit them!" Khuler moaned, but did so quietly enough that appeared Hauster had not heard him. A few others grumbled as well and glares were passed back and forth. Before much could come of it Hauster had ordered them through the next door.

B-03 was just a warren of hallways and purpose driven rooms. The next room Jagg shuffled into was similar to the rest. It was slab gray and lit by harsh artificial lighting embedded in the ceiling. Fifty chairs, in two rows of twenty five dominated the center of the room. The cold iron chairs faced the wall, leaving an aisle between them. Jagg, Khuler, Callum and Kellen Raous all sat side by side, their kit in their laps, wrapped in the blankets that itched just to look at. The metal chairs were as uncomfortable as one would expect them to be.

Once the forty nine conscripts sat down Hauster marched in and paraded down the center aisle. He could feel the scarred sergeant behind him, but kept his eyes forward on the thoroughly un-entertaining wall. He heard a door open and moved to glance in the direction the sound emanated from but a rough hand grasped the top of his head and re-affixed his view of the wall. Once the hand of Hauster had left he did not let curiosity get the best of him again.

He could sense people moving down the aisle, and hear their boots.

Then came a buzzing sound and a sharp yelp from a conscript followed by Hauster barking, "Shut your mouth!"

The buzzing reminded him of the clippers that had shorn his head and he waited anxiously as a few more muffled yelps came from down the line. Closer and closer the buzzing came and the muffled cries accompanying it. Jagg nearly jumped from his seat when Khuler gave a strangled squeak. He knew that whatever was in store, he was next.

He felt cold against the nape of his neck and then heard the buzz. The buzz made him jump more than the pain. It was like a thin knife was being run up and down his neck slowly delivering fine cut after fine cut. His head rattled and the pain was sharp but bearable and just before it became enough that he wanted to squirm, it stopped. He felt a cold wet fabric run against his neck and an instant later came the sharp sting and distinct smell of counter septic. Then it was over.

The buzzing went on down the line till it stopped and Hauster called out from behind them, "The conscripts will not be issued ident tags yet. You aren't worthy of the cost of the metal. You have all had your serial number marked upon your necks. Cheaper! Even boys as stupid as yourself cannot lose them lest you lose your head. One does not leave once they have answered the Call. From now, till you die in the service of the Emperor, you belong to the Death Korps. I strongly recommend that you use the counter septic in your kit to prevent infection. Should your markings ever be damaged I shall see to it that you get new markings that will be placed squarely upon your..."

Jagg made a vow that he would never receive damage to the back of his neck, even if it cost him his life. The sergeant had them gather up their kit and leave. Up several flights of stairs they wearily trudged and entered their barracks. The room was large enough for, unsurprisingly enough, fifty men. There were twenty five bunks, doubled up for two per, an upper and a lower. They looked to him like metal cages with thin washed out mattresses stuffed in them. Under Hauster's glares and yells the youths stored their kit and clothes in metal footlockers marked with the symbol of the Death Korps which sat at the end of their bunks. They were at last given leave to sleep but only after prayers.

He shared a bunk with Callum, while Kellen Raous and Khuler opted for the one next to them. On his knees Jagg made the sign of the Aquila, folded his hands over his chest and linked his thumbs. He prayed hard, prayed for the worst of it to be over. Every Man of Krieg joined the Death Korps. It was everyone's holy duty to redeem the planet for its slide into civil war. He knew this and accepted it, and yet prayed that he had done enough. His face hurt, his body ached, his stomach yearned for food and that registered into a headache, while his neck burned from the marking which had been rendered onto him. As he crept into the bottom bunk he closed his eyes and dreamed of his mother. When the lights turned out and he was sure none could see or hear him he allowed himself to cry.

III

Square Peg. Round Hole.

Sub-Sector Lord Trajean, supreme master of Segmentum Tempestus, defender of Bakka, ever-foe of Hive Fleet Leviathan's splinters, water bringer of Tallarn, and his most holy and blessed Cathedral builder of Valedor, not to mention his most noble hereditary lord of Hiveworld Gladius, was not having a good day.

To start things off his breakfast had been ill-prepared. It wasn't bad, no. However, for a Sub-Sector Lord "wasn't bad" was simply not good enough. Upon his floating dais he had barely finished his unsatisfactory meal when the petitioners came barging in as if the galaxy had come to an end. Dozens of them, despite a host of well paid functionaries designed to weed out the nuisances from the real concerns, clamored for attention. Within his ornate palace, decorated top to bottom with large framed portraits and gilded in gold, the gaggle of petitioners were in every way uncouth. They simply did not blend in with the bronze cherubs and shimmering chandeliers.

With a bored expression and the inability to slam his hovering dais into the babbling petitioners without causing more headaches, the Sub-Sector Lord listened. As his father taught him he nodded sagely but said little and steepled his fingers, in what outsiders presumed was thought, but in truth was contemplation over his breakfast. For all the titles he held, Trajean thought he should have at the very least a fine, if not superb, breakfast on a daily basis.

"The aliens have increased their attacks. The PDF forces are, well, not trained to deal with this sort of situation my lord. The city of Kynder is in a state of near panic and Jendra IV's governor has been sending through his astropaths numerous pleas for assistance. I believe Jendra's governor thinks he is being ignored at this point," rambled on the Administratum toad before Lord Trajean.

In truth Trajean wanted nothing more than to confirm Jendra IV's planetary governor's suspicions, that he indeed was being ignored, but such would not have been tactful.

With a slow nod and a steeping of the fingers the Sub-Sector Lord harrumphed and mumbled, "Well..."

The edgy petitioner leaned in expectantly and linked his frail hands together.

"Well, is the city under siege? What was it called again? Kynder?" at last the Sub-Sector Lord queried.

The petitioner shook his head and said, "Well, not per se no. The planetary governor has sent word that it is the outlying farming communities which are suffering my Lord. However should they continue to be attacked, then food output would collapse and that would-"

"Lower the Imperial tithes, yes, yes," the Sub-Sector Lord intoned with some forced gravity and leaned back upon his humming and hovering dais, trying to find comfort in the array of pillows he surrounded himself with. Tithes! Now there was a serious concern. A true breakfast spoiler.

"I was going to say, or rather suggest, my Lord that the people of Jendra IV would starve and trade would be ruined. But as you have wisely foreseen my Lord this would reduce the yearly tithes, both from the lack of food production and due to the fact that dead citizens don't pay their taxes," replied the small robed official with a small bow of his head.

Trajean had the dull sensation that he had been insulted, but the pathetic Administratum petitioner seemed too subdued and meek to even contemplate such. Passing off the feeling, Trajean sniffed, then the Sub-Sector Lord nodded slowly as his father had taught him.

"Then it is a siege of sorts. The aliens are trying to starve out Jendra IV. Kynder is thus under siege. More or less. Easy enough. Have word sent to Krieg's Planetary Governor. Tell him that a chance to further redeem his horrid world has revealed itself and that the Emperor's foes are laying siege to Kynder. Have him dispatch a regiment. Meanwhile let Jendra IV's government rest easy in the knowledge that the Imperial Guard are on their way. Handle all the necessary transportation needs with the Imperial Navy. I'll of course apply my signet ring to all the proper documents," Trajean said quickly, eager to be rid of the nuisance.

The small man's mouth opened. He stammered a moment or two then swallowed.

Picking his words with care the functionary said, "I am most humble to beg my Lord's pardon, but are not the Death Korps a touch excessive for this sort of operation? The um, "siege" of Kynder isn't typical as sieges go. It **[PUZ]**s really a stretch to even call-"

"And the Death Korps aren't your typical guardsmen. Problem solved. Besides, I've nothing else handy to send I can think of off the top of my head, **[ECH]** Trajean said with a wave of his hand. The Sub-Sector Lord peered down at the petitioner and murmured, **[STB]** You've taken enough of my time now. See to it that my will is carried out. Oh! And good work. The Emperor smiles upon you." And with a wave of his hand Sub-Sector Lord Trajean, supreme master of Segmentum Tempestus, defender of Bakka, ever-foe of Hive Fleet Leviathan's splinters, water bringer of Tallarn, and his most holy and blessed Cathedral builder of Valedor, not to mention his most noble hereditary lord of Hiveworld Gladius, dismissed the weed-thin agent of the Administratum.

He sighed and looked to the next overly-eager petitioner.

"Now my good man, what is your problem?" the Sub-Sector lord asked.

"Orks my Lord!"

The Sub-Sector lord sighed, "Of course."

The lights snapped on overhead with a hum and he heard a roaring voice that was fast becoming familiar.

"Up! Up! Up! The conscripts will dress! The conscripts will make their bed! The conscripts will neatly stow away their kit! The conscripts will then stand to attention before their bunk!" came the bawling yell as Hauster marched across the room, physically yanking young men by their arms off the top bunk and to the floor with heavy thuds and yelps. His appearance had not changed. He was tall, big and scary with a charcoal uniform that was as immaculate as ever.

Jagg rolled out of his bunk and hurried to his footlocker. His face and body still hurt. His hands were already shaking with nerves as he opened the locker to reveal absolutely nothing. Panic seized him and his blood went cold. He had on a pair of underwear and nothing else. A quick glance at his bunk revealed his clothing was not stored under it, nor around or even near it. Everything he had, save what he wore, was gone.

Callum hopped off his bunk just as Hauster thundered past and scrambled to his own footlocker adjacent to Jagg's. He opened it and frowned.

"Well sh*t." The two shared a concerned look.

Within a few minutes forty seven young men had donned their uniforms as per the regulations for non-combat situations as cited in the Infantryman's Uplifting Primer; Krieg edition. Two men meanwhile stood to attention in their underwear. Such attire was noted in the little book, but only for sleeping in non-combat situations.

He was sure that he was in for another beating. Callum seemed to think the same thing given the resigned look upon his face. From the far end of the barracks Hauster began his inspection.

Bunk by bunk the sergeant roamed. A bed improperly made was flipped, the mattress tossed on the ground and the sheets sent awry. A messy footlocker had a handful of its contents picked up and scattered on the cold stone floor. An improperly buttoned uniform was rewarded with a solid

punch to the gut that doubled over even the biggest of the young men. The sergeant then came to stand before Jagg and Callum's bunk.

The man's brown eyes burned like fire and his twisted lip flexed, exposing more of his pale teeth.

Several clacks came forth and in a voice that was nearly a whisper Hauster said, "Do the conscripts find humor in this?"

"No Sergeant!" Jagg and Callum replied, almost in unison.

"Have the conscripts already forgotten what they learned five short hours ago regarding proper dress?" the Sergeant hissed and a few flecks of spittle landed on Jagg. He could smell Hauster's breath, it smelled of caffeine and some sort of meat product.

He straightened the best he could and as schola taught him, kept his eyes forward. He could sense Callum doing the same and once more together they replied, "No Sergeant!"

Hauster looked down at the open and empty footlockers and with a swift double kick shut both. The banging of the metal lids made everyone jump as it reminded them so much of a particular pistol's discharge. The sergeant regarded the lockers before looking back to the two underwear-clad conscripts.

"Losing Imperial property is a crime. In the field of battle it can result in summary execution. Do the conscripts wish me to report their actions to Commissar Shtall? Shall I inform him that two of the conscripts before even having a whiff of war have already lost not only some of their issued kit, but all of it?" he had not raised his voice past a sinister whisper.

"No Sergeant!" Jagg and Callum replied loudly. Jagg couldn't believe it.

He and Callum were on the verge of being shot for losing their equipment. Not losing. He and Callum didn't lose a thing, but Jagg did not voice accusations of theft. He doubted Hauster would want to hear excuses, or accept them. Callum must have deduced something similar Jagg reasoned

and like Jagg the hatchet faced youth with the flat nose kept his thoughts to himself.





"The conscripts will listen very, very, closely," Hauster seethed and leaned in-between the two so that his dire words were heard by them and them alone.

He whispered, "The conscripts will find all their equipment replaced when they are done with this day's training. The two conscripts will from this point onwards lock their footlockers. They might even set a watch and brain whoever thought it charming to tamper with their belongings. A soldier must protect his equipment, even from other soldiers. Do the two of you understand?"

"Yes, Sergeant!" Jagg and Callum called out. A touch of relief entered Jagg. They weren't going to be shot. Hauster had known somehow that their locker had been raided. Had this happened before? Jagg was lost in thought and never saw the punch coming. A heavy blow to his stomach sent him to his knees retching, though nothing but yellow bile came up. Callum gave a wheezing cough and joined Jagg upon the ground, but had the decency to not throw up.

Above them Hauster towered and his hands planted upon his hips as he took a wide stance.

Contempt spat out with every word he uttered to the young men, "The conscripts here shall perform today's training in the attire they have on. For their inability to keep a firm eye on their inanimate, immobile, and rather bulky belongings all of the conscripts will find themselves pushed harder today than I intended. And I already intended to push you hard."

He looked down at the two a moment more and strode across the room bawling as he did so, "The conscripts will make their beds, neatly stow their kit, and will head down the stairs. The conscripts will see a door marked  Mess Hall . This is in fact a hallway, and the conscripts will not wait there for their food! They will move down the hallway and find another set of doors, also conveniently labeled  Mess Hall . There are no pictures this time. A little advanced work for you mental slugs. Those

who are utterly lacking in even the rudimentary understanding of the written language follow your noses. Past this second door the conscripts will find B-03's actual PUI1 Mess Hall PUI2. You will line up, collect a tray, plate, cup, and cutlery and let the servitors dish out today's breakfast. You will then sit at the tables provided. The conscripts will not eat, till every last one of you is seated. Together you will say aloud the Blessing of the Emperor's Feast. You may then eat. Upon finishing this ill-deserved meal the Conscripts will use the lavatories. You piss when I tell you to piss. You *sht, only when I tell you to sht*. Don't PUI2 miss out on the opportunity I provide. Finally the conscripts will return to the stairwell and head to the bottom floor. A doorway marked exit will be discovered. The conscripts will assemble in a shoulder to shoulder line on B-03 PUI2's parade slab."

Hauster let his lengthy orders sink in, which gave Jagg and Callum enough time to stand, mostly recover and stand to attention.

The sergeant clacked his teeth and growled out, "Do the conscripts understand?"

"Yes, Sergeant!" the forty nine cried out, though it was hardly in unison and very unlikely they all heard and understood the entirety of Hauster PUI2's orders.

"You have fifteen minutes. A second late and consider lunch a fantasy never to occur again. Dismissed!" Hauster answered and the men ran for their meals, half tripping over themselves.

It was a race to the Mess Hall, a race to sit down, and the fastest Blessing of the Emperor's Feast Jagg had ever uttered. None dared break Hauster's rules. Though the terrifying sergeant had not accompanied them to the Mess Hall, no one doubted that he would know if the conscripts somehow failed to carry out his orders.


"I think someone stole your stuff," Khuler said between hasty mouthfuls of a high protein soup that everyone had commented was shockingly good. The boy looked even younger with his shaved head. Khuler looked to those gathered about his table and waited for a response.

Callum grinned wryly as he shoveled soup into his mouth. He had one arm looped around the bowl and glass as if protecting them and the way he used his spoon it could very well double as a spear should someone venture too near his meal.

"Bright kid you are," Callum said.

"I'm not a kid! I answered the Call didn't I? You're the one who didn't get it till you were older. Besides, you're in your underwear. You look silly. And you had to walk to the Assembly point. My mother..." Khuler sniffled and once more his blue eyes became glassy at the very mention of his parent.

"Oh don't get that way Khuler. We all miss you ma', it's not just you," Callum grinned and drained his glass of water and stood up sharply.

"Been fun, but I've roughly three minutes to relieve myself if that chronometer on the wall isn't lying, hide any stains, and be ready in my non-standard non-combat situation dress. 

"I think it will be standard issue in a matter of days," Jagg added and rubbed his nose. It wasn't broken, but it felt full and tender. He sounded nasal to his own ears and he imagined his voice must sound worse to the others. Frankly, it hurt. Then again so did his cheek, stomach and shoulder. The protein soup at least was the most filling meal he had ever tasted and offered some respite to what had thus far been little more than a stream of abuse.

"Done yourself real good, Jagg. Not here hardly a day and you've made enemies. Besides the sergeant that is," said someone sitting across from Jagg.

He looked much like everyone else to Jagg. He was bald, pale, and indistinguishable from roughly forty other conscripts. The jueue offered a cold smile and pushed his meal away before leaving.

Kellen Raous sighed and offered to Jagg an apologetic look with his green eyes. "My friend, he's right. The Emperor has a way of handing out his wrath though, to those who deserve it. We'll need to keep an eye out. To act as his instrument."

"So someone doesn't steal their stuff again? Well Jagg's stuff. Let them take Callum's kit. He deserves a beating," Khuler said and nodded, more to himself than anyone else. He dipped back down into his soup when no general assertion came.

"Thanks. Thanks to both of you," Jagg nodded Khuler's way and the bright smile the youth offered almost made Jagg laugh. Jagg peered out across the Mess Hall. Someone amongst them had sabotaged Callum and himself. He could see no eyes upon him, no glares, nor hear any snide snickers. Who would want him harm and why?

Khuler looked up suddenly his eyes bright and said, "Speaking of stolen stuff, you think they'll give us our stuff back? You know the stuff we brought from home on the transport?"

"Yeah, ahh, no," Jagg offered, though with his nasal tones the sarcasm was apparently lost on Khuler who simply looked down in a dejected manner. Jagg sighed and rose to use the lavatory.

Krieg's subterranean hives were cold. Always. Jagg never truly realized how cold the false outdoors of the underground levels were till he found himself standing in a shoulder to shoulder line clad in only his white underwear. Everyone was standing to attention and Jagg attempted to stay locked up and tall, so as not to be seen shivering.

Jagg found himself next to Callum, for it was only natural that those in the non-standard uniforms should be side by side. On the other side of him was another soldier who Jagg didn't recognize. No conversations were had and the only sounds heard were from the military compound's day to day affairs. Vehicles trundled about, flyers hovered past, soldiers marched, and the sounds of such echoed and bounced about █(PU1)█B-03█(PU2)█'s parade ground. Meanwhile the conscripts were silent.

Jagg could see from his vantage point two other buildings similar to their own barracks nestled between the compound's super structures, █(PU1)█B-01█(PU2)█ and █(PU1)█B-02█(PU2)█. In front of each building fifty conscripts were arrayed in shoulder to shoulder lines standing at attention. They looked identical to each other and would have looked identical to █(PU1)█B-03█(PU2)█'s conscripts if not for Jagg and Callum.

From between the three barrack buildings strode, fittingly enough, three men of Krieg in proper charcoal uniforms. Jagg could see that one of them was Sergeant Hauster. The other two he assumed were the sergeants of the other buildings. The three were speaking as they walked. The trio halted at a point between the three barracks, spoke a bit more then separated; each heading to their respective conscripts.

Sergeant Hauster swept down the line and offered only a handful of punches to those who had not properly straightened their tunics, or had left a button undone after using the lavatory. Unsure if they were going to be fed again, those hit made a visible effort not to lose their breakfast. When struck some gagged only to hastily swallow back down whatever had tried to come up.

Hauster began, "The conscripts will look to the man on their left. They will read out the number on the back of his neck. That conscript will

memorize that number, for it is his name till he is no longer a conscript." Hauster walked to the man on the end of the aisle and read aloud the number permanently inked on the back of his neck. That youth in turn looked to the man on his left and did the same and so on down the line as ordered.

"Looks like you're 3501706249" Callum said.

Jagg frowned, not sure he could remember such a random and long number without hearing it a few times. Dutifully he read off the number of the next conscript and whispered to himself his own digits, "350,170,6249."

Jag cautiously asked Callum to read the number etched on the back of his neck out loud while others were doing much the same in an effort to memorize their meat tags.

Again and again Jagg whispered the number until Hauster's voice shouted out, echoing with that of the other sergeants who were busy screaming at their charges, who were apparently just as stupid as the men of B-03. In that Jagg took some comfort.

"The conscripts will learn to march this day," Hauster said. "In sections. Each section will have ten men except for section five. We started off down a man and so section five will have nine members. It will regardless carry as much, march as much, and do as much work as every other section. Listen, you sniveling teat yearning pricks, for your number. Upon hearing your number you will stand where I point, in a single file line! That's the back to front line, not the shoulder to shoulder."

The sergeant waited as his orders sank in and produced a data slate from within his charcoal-hued tunic. Rapidly he began calling off numbers and pointed those who stepped forth to which section they were assigned. Jagg was not thoroughly surprised when he found himself the first one appointed to the undermanned section five. He was less surprised when the second person was Callum, and absolutely nonplussed when the third victim of section five ended up being Kellen Raous. Khuler's quiet whining must have truly been unheard by all, save Jagg and his

companions, for he had the fortune of being the first person assigned to section two.

Jagg stayed at attention and glanced quickly at the other six conscripts appointed to section five. While he recognized them as being fellow conscripts of {PU1}B-03{PU2}, he could place no names with them and didn't fully catch their numbers. They were just another gaggle of bald pale youths in Jagg's eyes.

"The conscripts have all been placed in their sections. The head of the section is your section leader. Do not piss him off. It is his duty to lead the section. He will have a lot on his mind. Failure in his most important of tasks is unforgivable. A mistake by a section leader is a mistake that in real war will get you all very much killed," Hauster said as he paced, eyeing each section leader in turn to emphasize the point.

It looked like Khuler nearly fainted and Jagg somehow felt more naked under Hauster's brown intense gaze. Jagg could find no reason, other than a desire to see him fail and die, as to why the malicious sergeant had made him section leader. Not only did he make Jagg a section leader, but leader of section five, which was down a man. He had been set up to fail, along with Callum and Kellen Raous.

Hauster called out, "The rest of you have sacred duties as well. Number two position, you will operate the vox. Conscripts do not get real voxes at first and so I shall personally issue you with a sack of rockrete of the appropriate weight. Number three position, you are the medicus of the section. When the men are wounded, you make sure they get up and fight again. You are not a doctor, so don't act like one. You are a stop-gap measure till the real medicae team can arrive to clean up the mess your section leader no doubt caused. Number four, five, six, seven and eight positions, you are troopers. You pull the trigger and kill the enemy. Simple task for simple minds," {ECH} Hauster {PU2}'s ruined face formed a semblance of a smile as he continued, {STS} "If you've not already figured it out, you are the most expendable. Do not give your section leader cause to waste your near meaningless lives. Position nine; you will man the heavy weapon of the section. Given I do not trust you not to ignite yourselves with a heavy

flamer, nor do I think you could hit anything with a rocket launcher, or keep a heavy bolter in good working order, you will be assigned a durable, conscript proof, heavy stubber. As you can imagine, it weighs a lot. Which leaves the number ten position. You are an ammo bitch. You will carry the ammo cases that Mr. Heavy so voraciously eats up."

As their positions were assigned Jagg could hear a whisper from the number nine spot in his section, "God-Emperor I can't do both!"

The whisper wasn't quiet enough, that, or Hauster's hearing was selective.

The sergeant roared, "Can't do both I hear? Did I order the conscripts to speak?"

"No, Sergeant!" the sections replied.

"That's right, I did not! Section leaders, you will learn the tasks of every position in your section as if it were your own. For it may one day very well be. Each man will learn how to complete the tasks of position nine. Mr. Heavy must never stop firing! Position three; you will learn the tasks of position two. Communication must continue! When someone dies, ECH Hauster paused for effect, STS And they will, the section must continue performing. No one is important. The section is important. Understood?" Hauster stamped his booted foot so as to bring further attention to his point. The sound of his heel on the rockrete slab reverberated about the compound.

"Yes, Sergeant!" came the swift chorus of voices.

"Then let us learn how to march. It's like walking, which thus far you all can barely manage. By the time I'm done with you, you'll move like a Techpriest built you in a Forge World. Right, left, right left, lock step! Let us start off with a demonstration section, so that I might illuminate you all through the errors of others. Section five will take ten paces forward," Hauster said.

It took Jagg all of three minutes to learn the true difficulty of marching. It wasn't the actual doing it that was tricky, but rather getting everyone to do

it together. One missed step, one confused left instead of a right, a single pace taken too far, and the routine collapsed and caused more errors. Jagg was the only one however to suffer the consequences of said errors.

Trooper 5651238933, "affectionately" known as Five Six Five, for example mixed up his right from his left. In punishment Hauster gripped Jagg's ear and twisted it in a way which created a pain he'd never felt there before, even when the Schola marms, or his own mother were at their best.

Trooper 2990902657, whom the sergeant called Two Nine Nine, and whom Jagg called Callum, had the bad habit of taking a half step forward when the word "Halt!" was boomed out. For the transgression, Jagg received a slap that opened his lip again and put the taste of blood in his mouth.

When trooper Two Nine Nine made another error Jagg glanced back to the underwear-clad conscript, "You fricker get it right!"

"I'm trying! It's-"

Callum was cut off by Hauster's hand snapping out to grip Jagg's ear and deliver a twist that nearly sent him to his knees.

"Keep your section in order Three Five Oh. If you just wait for them to get it right, you'll be lacking ears, a nose, one thumb, and two teeth. You understand?" Hauster asked.

Jagg winced and said between gritted teeth, teeth he wished to keep, "Yes, Sergeant!"

When Hauster released his worn and red ear Jagg brought a hand to it and found it as tender as his nose.

He glared back at Callum and hissed, "Listen, get it right next time, or I'm passing on, with interest, Hauster's attentions. I can't wait for you to just figure it out!"

Callum scowled, apparently unused to being threatened by someone he saw as an equal and not as his better. Jagg himself was curious as to what

luck he would have doing anything to Callum if it came to it. In their short time together Jagg had reasoned out Callum lived in a level of the hives far below what people called "decent". Who knew how many fights Callum had been through?

The test came when Callum, Two Nine Nine, once again skipped forward on bare feet when Hauster belted forth a "Halt!"

In three paces Hauster was at Jagg's side and with a growl of disgust twisted his ear again, causing it to make a soft crunching sound.

Jagg howled and it took all of his willpower not to reach up and fend off the sergeant's grasping fingers. When the vile man finally loosened his iron grip Jagg whirled about and sent his fist towards into Callum's face. The blow was wild and guided by Jagg's own pain and skipped off Callum's cheek and across his already flat nose.

The hatchet faced youth, who had prepared for such an occasion, turned with the blow. He stepped out of the line to return with one of his own strikes. Before his raised fist could strike, Hauster had gripped Callum's wrist and with a twist and push sent the boy to his knees. Hauster held Callum's hand behind his own back and twisted up, eliciting a scream, while the sergeant's other hand grabbed Callum by the throat.

Everyone blinked in surprise and when Hauster leaned in to whisper in Callum's ear, it was still loud enough for everyone to hear, "I just saved your life Two Nine Nine. Striking your commander, even if he isn't an officer, is one of those offenses I send off to Commissar Shtall. The good Commissar takes discipline and the chain of command quite seriously. You might even say he doesn't tolerate a single violation when it comes to command. You hear me?"

Callum's eyes dripped with tears and with his throat grasped by the sergeant, the best he could manage was a croaking, "Yes."

"Do you all hear?" the Man of Krieg whispered, but as he obviously intended, everyone heard and replied with the correct unified response. He let Callum free and grunted at him to return to the section.

Jagg felt a deep pang of guilt and tried to say something to Callum, something apologetic, but a stern glance from Hauster kept his lips still.

Callum silently stood behind Jagg.

There were far fewer errors after that and Hauster eventually sent section five back to watch and called forth another section to demonstrate. The sergeant said it was important to "see right" as well as "do right".

Section after section went through Hauster's routines. Forward. Halt. About face. Quick time. At Ease. Attention. Then together they all marched in what Hauster called a Conscript Platoon. They did much the same as they had by section, though new marches were added. Close Order, when they marched as one might imagine, nearly on top of one another. Then Open Order, where some breathing room was provided. Errors, Jagg noticed, occurred more often in the platoon marches than it did in the section marches. Jagg figured it was a numbers game. The more people marching, the more likely someone was going to muck it up.

Mistakes committed as a Conscript Platoon were charmingly fair when it came to punishment. An error resulted in all five section leaders taking a belt to the gut, a twist to the ear, or a particularly unique insult usually involving the word, "mother".

Without his chronometer and with Krieg's "outdoor" lights always humming brightly, time was impossible to measure for Jagg. Again and again they marched, by section, then by platoon, then back to section. They marched till Jagg felt blood on the bottom of his bare feet. A look back revealed Callum was suffering the same. His socks were soaked through with red.

"Fall out. I don't need Three Five Oh and Two Nine Nine staining the parade ground with their thin blood anymore. The conscripts will return to the mess hall. You have fifteen minutes to repeat your breakfast ordeal. The conscripts will then try once again to learn how to march, since thus far all they can manage to do is walk in what seems to be the same direction at almost the same time! Now go!" Hauster yelled and pointed. The conscripts of [REDACTED] B-03 [REDACTED] jogged to the Mess Hall for lunch.

Jagg and Callum limped a bit and were the last to leave the parade ground.

Jagg sighed and looked at his companion saying, "I'm sorry. It hurt is all and it seemed like the right thing to do."

"Right thing to do?" Callum replied and shot Jagg a withering look.

Jagg sighed, "Well, not right. I know. Effective. It's not like I asked to be section leader. I've been here barely a day and Hauster wants me dead. I'd switch roles with you given half a chance." Jagg slipped into the confines of [REDACTED] B-03 [REDACTED] and Callum followed.

"I guess. Hmmph. At this rate I'll have your job before the week is out. Then Kellen Raous will get a crack at it," Callum said with a smirk.

"Think they'll bury us separate or in a single pit?"

"Oh, I bet Hauster eats the dead. Craps them out, and flushes em as a final punishment. So together in a sense. One happy dead pile of dung."

The day was one of marches. By section, by platoon. Over and over again till Jagg's mind rattled with commands and his feet burned with blisters. Errors, Jagg hoped, would decrease throughout the day, but as Jagg felt they were nearing supper, the amount of mistakes had increased. After supper once more to the parade ground the conscripts of [REDACTED]B-03[REDACTED], which had become quickly known as "Bitch Ot Three" by its members, shambled forth.

Errors were on the rise and the section leaders were almost in tears. In Khuler's case, he was in tears. The small youth must have been the youngest in section two, if not the youngest in the platoon, and it had taken till well past supper time for him to finally start screaming at his stumbling men. His strikes came next after simple cries failed to keep his men in order; fast and furious blows they were and while not strong, the boy made up for it in volume.

Jagg nearly laughed as he saw Khuler whimper from a slap delivered by Hauster, then in turn shriek and claw at the face of one of his section troopers.

The boy even managed some insults between his blubbing tears, "In step! Step! How frickin hard can it be? One, two, one two. Left, right, left right! What's wrong with you? Why can't you do it? Why? Why? Why?"

Any humor Jagg felt was dampened however by the errors of his section. Callum thankfully made no further mistakes, and Kellen Raous seemed to take to marching. Trooper Five Six Five on the other hand became the biggest source of irritation for Jagg. At the Mess Hall Jagg had learned that he was one of the eldest in the Conscript Platoon. He was eighteen, nearing nineteen. His name was Bunderson, and he was big. His neck was thick, his shoulders strong, his hands large, but his feet were as ungainly as that of a cripple. Jagg was at first light with his strikes to the larger boy. Jagg decided it didn't pay to make someone as physically large as Bunderson upset. After all, they wouldn't be marching around all the time.

After what felt like the tenth error though and a nearly broken nose, Jagg had had enough. He struck at the bigger boy with a knee to the groin,

eliciting a general "Ohh" from all the conscripts and what Jagg swore was a laugh from Hauster.

Jagg spat at Bunderson, "That's it. From now on, all of you listen up. I'm in my underwear, my feet are bleeding, and I'm as beat up as a topside Rad-dweller. I am passing on with interest. I get hit, you get hit worse. You all got it?" Jagg took their silence and dull nods as a mostly good sign and he tried to ignore the burning glare from Bunderson.

At this point Jagg knew it wouldn't do to show any hesitation. Frankly it was a matter of survival. If he didn't instill fear in his section then Hauster would surely instill a broken rib in Jagg.

Krieg had no true day or night. Krieg ground on and on relentlessly, its "outdoor" lights humming ever bright. Boys went to school. Men trained. Men worked. Men died. Women did much the same. Over and over with a soulless relentless finality Krieg ran. One went along with Krieg's clockwork nature, or one got ground beneath its slow and inexorable wheels.

Jagg marched and felt the pain of errors and passed them on with interest. He marched till his head was woozy and his bare feet no longer burned but simply wept. When the final, "Fall out," came from Hauster's lips Jagg gave thanks to the God-Emperor for saving him. At least for the moment. He knew tomorrow that training, like Krieg, would grind on.

Wearily the conscripts of (P11) B-03 (P12) showered as they were ordered, used the lavatory as they were ordered and headed to their upstairs bunks and prepared for sleep as ordered. Callum and Jagg both sighed in relief when they found on top of their bunks newly issued attire and kit. They bound one another (P2)s worn feet with medi-tape. After, with great care they locked their kit away and checked one another's footlocker to ensure their belongings were secure. Neither was eager to don the non-standard non-combat situation dress for the next day's trials.

Wake, dress, eat, toilet, parade march, eat, toilet, parade march, eat, toilet, parade march, shower sleep repeat. An entire week of parade ground drill had drummed into Jagg the mechanics of Imperial Guard life. It was organized, at least on the surface, predictable for the most part and by and large, boring. Painful and frightening only came into the picture when Sergeant Hauster did.

Every three days the routine broke and in the morning, or what they perceived to be morning, Jagg and his fellow conscripts of [REDACTED] Bitch Ot Three [REDACTED], did laundry in a room which smelled of sweaty fabric and was not only hot, but stagnant and heavy on the lungs. At the end of the week the conscripts of [REDACTED] B-01 [REDACTED], [REDACTED] B-02 [REDACTED], and [REDACTED] B-03 [REDACTED] sat together in a Ministorium chapel located within the subterranean military compound. It was the highlight of Jagg's week, for the Lector gave inspiring sermons, touting the values of the Emperor and applauding the conscripts for following them. It was the only compliment Jagg had received since he had answered the Call. The service put into Jagg a fresh spirit. He knew that the work he did was holy and that Krieg's redemption would be made manifest by his own personal actions. That fresh and uplifted spirit within Jagg was then soundly beat back down the following week, only to be renewed once again come week's end. Jagg had a nagging sensation that it was planned that way. That even his feelings were being organized and regimented by the Death Korps. Were the religious services like fuel for a machine running almost dry?

The third week introduced the lads of [REDACTED] Bitch Ot Three [REDACTED] to marching yet again, but not on the parade ground. Instead Hauster ordered them all to don their standard attire for combat. Tunic, boots, webbing, kits, satchels, shell helms and more. The Uplifting Primer proved itself again a life-saver and enabled them all to get it right with only the occasional blow from the sergeant.

Weapons were then handed out. Jagg was given a holster and a pistol that looked similar to Hauster's, yet more archaic and ancient. The weapon's previous owner had kept it clean, but the whole thing rattled as Jagg slid it into the holster and a look of distaste came across his features.

Hauster grunted, "You are the section leader. Your job isn't to run about willy nilly and pull the trigger. Your job is going to be keeping the section fighting at an optimal level. The pistol isn't for the enemy."

Jagg paled and looked horror stricken at the weapon at his side and by then Hauster had moved on handing out bolt action slug throwers and an ancient heavy stubber. All of the weapons had been produced from a box on the parade ground in which the arms had been simply dumped, which partially explained why the wooden stocks were cracked and the once dark metal of the barrels were nicked with glints of raw steel.

The sergeant's comment about mimicking the weight of a vox-caster proved to be true as Callum was given a backpack filled with rocks to carry. Given they weren't to be trusted with live weapons, no ammo was handed out, but slabs of rockrete to mimic the weight of ammo were.

"Section leader I can't carry all this," complained Seven Three Three, Keyser. Keyser had been dreading the task of hauling the heavy stubber, and through he wore it well, supported by a stout strap around his shoulders, the slightly pudgy youth looked dubiously at the rock slabs being hauled out for the ammo carrier. An ammo carrier which section five lacked.

Jagg let out a long breath and when Sergeant Hauster hoisted out a few heavy slabs with his own strong hands, Jagg made a quick decision.

"Thompson, Help-" Jagg felt the glare from the Sergeant and quickly corrected himself. "Two One Eight, Two One Nine, take up some of those slabs, as much as you can handle. Seven Three Three, think you can pick up what's left over? Come real-time, those two will be closest to you and it can't hurt to have some ammo on the go."

Everyone grunted in acknowledgement, Hauster included. The sergeant clacked his teeth and looked everyone over, "assisting" them in storing slabs of rockrete or properly holding their aged bolt actions.

When Hauster deemed the conscripts, as he put it, "Ready to at least look the part of soldiers," he broke into a swift jog and called out, "The

conscripts will follow in platoon close order! The conscripts will not fall out of file! Keep up you nutless wonders and if any of you make me look bad, I'll make you look worse!"

Boots pounded the slabs and Jagg noticed for the first time they were almost in unison. Not perfect. The combat attire and weaponry was throwing off the pattern they were used to, but all in all Jagg felt [REDACTED] B-03 [REDACTED] was finally doing something right.

Hauster jogged at a steady, even pace. He was soon joined by the sergeants of [REDACTED] B-01 [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] B-02 [REDACTED], whose conscripts jogged behind them. Boom, boom, boom, came the steady tromping of boots and almost naturally the three platoons fell into an even jog, their strides almost synchronizing. Boom, boom, boom.

"What shall it be, Fraun?" called out one of the sergeants.

To which Hauster replied, "I believe the [REDACTED] Emperor's Light Shines On All [REDACTED] will be a fine start."

Hauster, Fraun Hauster, glanced back once as he jogged.

The scarred man called out in his parade ground voice, "The conscripts will sing, [REDACTED] Emperor's Light Shines On All [REDACTED]!"

Boom, boom, boom. With Hauster's first throaty note of praise to the Golden Throne came the singing chorus of young men. Through the compound the conscripts jogged, singing up to Him as they weaved between buildings, past idle Chimera armored transports, under the shadow of passing Vulture flyers, and past men of Krieg who had the honor of wearing charcoal uniforms.

The cooler air of the false outdoors felt good against Jagg's face and though he felt the burn of acids in his legs, the pain was nothing compared to what Hauster could, and had already, dished out to him in the weeks prior. Jagg jogged past the pain, singing in tune with his fellow conscripts, keeping up pace and time with Hauster who didn't even break a sweat as they moved through the monstrously large compound. Singing while

marching was a new feat, and not easy. But Jagg and the conscripts out of holy respect, and healthy fear, did not stop with their voiced praises.

{PU1} Our Fortress is Terra {PU2}. {PU1} Golden Throne on High {PU2}. {PU1} To Him Our Lives to Him Our Souls {PU2}. {PU1} The Emperor Enduring {PU2}. All were sung, with Hauster leading them through the verses as surely as he led them through the compound. The sergeant's growling voice turned the hymns of the Ministorium into the hymns of soldiers and the conscripts sang, jogged and sang some more.

At one point a rockrete slab must have fallen out of a tunic pocket, for Jagg heard it fall and break apart behind him.

He almost stopped singing, fearing that someone in section five had blundered, but Hauster without even looking back abruptly ended his rendition of {PU1} Onward Emperor's Soldiers {PU2} and said, "Section two! Six Six Two, I will let your infantile imagination ponder as to what it is I'm going to do to you when this little stroll is over."

Six Six Two, Khuler, screamed out with his child like voice, "Two Seven Eight! I know it was you. Don't try and deny it. Oh, I'm going to piss down your throat. Right down it. Start thinking about piss right now! You'll like it too, cause it'll taste so much better than the blood you'll be puking up after!" By the time Khuler's rapid vitriol had ended the conscripts were silent.

"No one told you to stop singing! Did I tell them to stop singing?" Hauster roared.

"I don't think so, Fraun. They surely can't be out of breath? Already?" came one sergeant's wry reply.

"Surely not, but they will be. Open Order. Quick Time! With lofty voices filled with His light, the conscripts will sing, from the top, {PU1} Onward Emperor's Soldiers {PU2}!" Hauster yelled. The booming of feet rapidly increased with Hauster guiding them to breathlessness and weariness.

Wake, dress, eat, toilet, parade march, eat, toilet, run, eat, toilet, parade march, shower, sleep, repeat. The third week ground by, and Jagg felt physically exhausted even at the start of the day. Everyone in [REDACTED] B-03' had become lean, like hungry dogs and ate like dogs as well. The one blessing of the Call had been the food. The soups alternated in flavor, were full of protein and thus far had always been surprisingly tasty. Jagg looked forward to the weekly services, but also looked forward for the food. The pain of Hauster's musical jaunts through the compound was offset by the reward of the day's thick and filling soups.

The fourth week had seen them all perfect parade ground drill and the long distance runs while painful still, were manageable.

Formation was kept as they ran and Hauster offered them a compliment in the form of, "Do my ears deceive me? Can it be? Do the conscripts run as one? Shut your mouths and listen to that. Listen!"

Jagg did, and it was amazing. Perfect movement. They were not one hundred and twenty four conscripts jogging behind their sergeants. They were one being, running on two hundred and forty eight legs. Jagg had never heard perfection before until that very moment. He had never been a part of perfection until then. The feeling was miraculous.

Hauster laughed. It was a deep grating laugh. "It's wonderful!" And it was.

On the fifth week their daily drill changed. Only a few minutes were spent on parade ground drill and the jogs were more of a warm up exercise than a test of physical and mental endurance. The rest of their day was divided up into other activities and the boredom began to wear off as Jagg experienced changes to his routine.

Into a sturdy Chimera transport they were loaded by section, without explanation. The Chimeras were Mars Alpha Pattern. A Krieg specialty model. Tracked vehicles whose turrets mounted twin linked heavy stubbers, rather than the more expensive and customary autocannon or multi-laser. The vehicles could fit twelve soldiers, who from within the armored hull could man lasguns mounted on the exterior. For once, section five's reduced strength became a benefit. The Chimera, normally a cramped place, was downright roomy for them.

The Chimera rocked and swayed as it sped off. Jagg felt an almost instant motion sickness. There were no windows to look out of and the lasguns' targeting cameras had been switched off.

"Kellen, you learn anything about motion sickness?" Jagg asked as he bounced atop the bench of the Chimera and listened to the sounds of the tracks roaring across the man made landscape of Krieg.

As the stop-gap medicus of the section, Kellen Raous had the duty of reading up on basic field medicine in the Uplifting Primer and was given additional training from time to time by the various specialists who sometimes accompanied Sergeant Hauster. As section leader Jagg was expected to be mindful of everyone's duties but Raous had a knack for medicine where as Jagg did not.

"Yes section leader!" Kellen beamed. "Throw up in Keyser's helmet. Not your own."

"Funny. Yeah, real funny. I'm laughing. Ha." Keyser responded as he cradled his heavy stubber in his lap. With so few in the transport he had the room and with every jar of the Chimera and the heavy stubber rattled more than the vehicle did.

"I have an interesting thought? Permission to speak freely section leader" Callum lazily said, a broad smile touching his lips.

"You're going to be the vox-max, so sure. Speak up. Get used to talking. Nice to see some proper respect in that you've asked for my permission," Jagg replied.

Callum grinned wider and emitted a sound best saved for the lavatory. Inside the Chimera, with its recycling air, the smell was literally inescapable.

"Ohh, permission denied Two Nine Nine! Denied!" Jagg gripped his nose and general laughter and sounds of disgust roared through the interior of the armored personnel carrier as it carted them to some unknown destination.

By the time the Chimera had come to a halt and its doors opened the smell had only become worse.

Eagerly section five pounded out the back of the Chimera and Jagg heard a voice voxed into the emptying compartment, "Get the frick out of my track!" Jagg assumed it must have been the driver.

[PUB] Bitch Ot Three's **[PUB]** conscripts emptied out of the five Chimeras and found themselves in a walled off area. Like everything about Krieg's subterranean hives, there was lots of rockrete, lots of gray, and plenty of harsh florescent light from far, far above. Flak board had been set up in places, as well as firing lanes, targets and an obstacle course composed of metal boxes stacked up at varying heights.

Hauster was already there to greet them and Jagg couldn't see how the sergeant had ended up getting there before them. He saw no transport and mildly wondered if the old bast*ard hadn't just outrun them on foot.

"Behind me you will see a table. No, it is not mealtime. You don't get a lunch today. Instead you get live ammo. So toss the slabs and load up. These are live slugs, live belts and you do not want to misuse them. Nor put the wrong slug in the wrong hole,"

Hauster laughed darkly and then stopped himself with a grin, "Oh right. Virgins. You won't get that joke. Just don't muck up. Now move!"

The conscripts moved towards the table and found boxes of ammo. For the bolt action slug throwers, five slugs were attached to stripper clips which made it easier to work in the ammo into the open receiver. The heavy stubbers had belted ammunition and cases of extra ammo which the ammo carriers hauled. Section five divvied up the load with two troopers taking up a can of ammo each and Keyser taking up two for himself. Keyser grunted under the weight, but had been told time and again by Hauster, [ST5] Lots of ammo good, no ammo bad. [ECH]

Jagg's revolver was loaded with small slugs, meant primarily to scare his section with and so he didn't bother taking more than the six he put into the cylinder. With a snap he shut the cylinder and sheathed the pistol at his side, confident he wasn't going to need it.

"Section leaders! See those lovely bolt actions over there? Take them up. Today is some basic target practice," Hauster said and pointed.



Jagg eagerly picked up the outdated slug throwing long arm and a few stripper clips. The stock was dried out and had been marked and remarked and bore serial numbers that didn't match the numbers etched on the barrel, or receiver, or bolt for that matter. He loaded the weapon quickly.

To the firing lanes Hauster led the conscripts and taught them the basics of how to use a bolt action slug thrower.

"Your weapon lacks the rate of fire of a lasgun. It lacks penetration power, but it does have some uses. The slugs your weapon fires are heavy and will knock a man over even if you hit him in the shoulder or foot. This is a good thing. I predict that you will have difficulty shooting a man anywhere and the best I can hope for is a foot or shoulder, [ECH] Hauster said with a grin.

He continued with the lesson, [ST5] It is also loud and may frighten your foe. The bolt action is also accurate, used by some snipers in place of a longlas."



Hauster placed the conscripts in the lanes and took away the bolt action from one of section four's troopers.

"Place the bolt action's stock firmly against your right shoulder. Tight, like this.  Hauster said and pulled the weapon close. He spoke while still at the ready,  Failure to do so will cause the weapon to harm your shoulder and I will be forced to harm the other one because I like symmetry. With the stock firm against your shoulder you will use your left hand to balance the weapon."

Hauster steadied the worn weapon with his hand and tucked the butt of the stock closer to his shoulder.

He tilted his head and called out, "There are two points to line up. First the marker slide. You will note it has numbers. These numbers indicate the range you will be firing at. This should be set to 100 yards. Level the marker slide with the sight at the end of the barrel. The little diamond shaped thing. Once you have achieved this, aim at your target, ensure the diamond's tip is just below where you wish to shoot. Slide, diamond, shoot."

The weapon fired with a resounding crack that echoed back from the walls and made Jagg jump. He was close enough to Hauster to feel a tingle in his ears from the shockwave of the weapon. Hauster's right hand slid the bolt up then back and a smoking empty brass case popped out to land with a metallic ping on the slab floor. Forward he moved the bolt, then back down. Bang! And again. Bang! Faster. Bang! Faster still. Bang! He handed the weapon back to the wide eyed trooper.

"Reload and repeat. Your schola taught you the basics, maybe even gave you a toy model to work with. Your Uplifting Primer has been prepared for the men of Krieg, and so it has plenty of pictures of the trusty bolt action,  Hauster said as he stepped back and pointed to the firing lanes, continuing,  Those with bolt actions start shooting at the targets. Do not point your weapon anywhere else. When you are out of ammo the conscripts will lower their weapons so it is pointed at the floor. The floor! Fetch more ammo. Lots of it. The conscripts will shoot, and shoot, and

shoot some more! Do not stop shooting until I say otherwise. Understood?"

"Yes, Sergeant!"

"Position nine. I shall personally instruct you on how to use your heavy stubber. Contrary to popular belief, you do not spray wildly and pray to the Emperor. Mr. Heavy you need to be smart," Hauster said and meandered towards those who had heavy stubbers. He began assisting them in setting up.

Jagg settled into his lane and looked down it. Far away he could see a box covered in black fabric marked by white target lines. As taught he readied the bolt action. He hefted the butt against his shoulder, placed his hand against the stock and aimed. Jagg's vision blurred a touch but he soon linked the target slide to the pointed end of the sight on the end of the barrel. Swallowing, he put his finger around the curved metal trigger, aimed for the center of the target and pulled.

The thunderous crack was louder, now that it came from the weapon in Jagg's hand. His hearing went fuzzy and he winced in pain as a high pitched drone echoed in his skull. His shoulder instantly hurt from the way the weapon kicked back into him. Others began firing and a staccato of weapon's fire broke out along the firing lanes.

Jagg worked the bolt back and smelled cordite as the empty brass case popped up in the air. Forward and down Jagg slid the bolt and felt it resist slightly. Once more Jagg aimed and pulled the trigger, but not before drawing the butt of the weapon a bit closer to his shoulder. Again and again he fired, till five rounds had snapped out from his weapon to completely miss the target. Not a single hole had appeared in the black fabric draped over the distant box. Cursing, Jagg opened the bolt and placed a stripper clip in the receiver. He pushed down with his thumb and the five rounds rolled into the weapon and the stripper clip detached. Unsure what to do with it Jagg tossed it on the ground next to his five spent shells.

For twenty minutes Jagg fired and managed to clip the target box once and make the black fabric rustle. By then the deep droning of the heavy stubbers joined the crackling of the bolt actions.

"No, no! Here," Hauster's voice was loud and in Jagg's ear.

In terror Jagg realized the sergeant was behind him, leaning over. Jagg tensed up, ready for the blow, but instead Hauster guided Jagg's hands.

"Work the bolt. Good. Aim. Good. Take a breath."

Jagg did so, but felt himself shaking and could smell the sergeant. If violence had a smell, the smell of Hauster was it.

"What are you afraid of? This isn't the time to be afraid. That isn't an ork or a drooling heretic. That's a box. A Man of Krieg does not fear a box? Do you fear a box Three Five Oh?" Hauster asked.

"No, Sergeant!" Jagg yelled over the sound of gunfire and tried to still himself. Swallowing he braced his body, aimed, took a breath and moved his finger upon the trigger.

"Hold that breath. Don't shoot. Let it out. Yes. Long, slow breaths. In. Hold. Out. Hold. Put the tip of your finger on the trigger, not the whole thing. There, just the tip. In. Hold. Out. Hold. Tip of the finger, eyes on the target, slide linked up to diamond. Aim a little low. Squeeze," Hauster said in what was almost a soothing tone.

Bang!

Jagg's teeth rattled as he held a breath and squeezed the trigger using just the tip of his finger. Smoke rose from the heated weapon and Jagg licked his drying lips as he gazed down the lane. Upon the black fabric he could make out a hole. Not dead center, no, but well within the target area.

Hauster stepped back and yelled out, "That's it. Now do that a hundred more times and just possibly when an ork comes charging at you, you can

put a bullet in its brain. At which point it will still come at you, but that's a lesson for another day."

Sighing in relief Jagg nodded and with the others fired away. The air grew thick with smoke, thick with cordite and Jagg soon felt thirst. His shoulder was sore and it became harder to aim. Just as he felt his skills were improving, they declined as the weariness in his arm intensified.

For hours on end they fired away. When at last the Chimeras came to pick the conscripts up, Jagg was surprised he didn't fall asleep sooner in the roomy bouncing interior.

IV

Graduation

The Death Korps were vaunted for their ability to handle lengthy sieges, but also in their ability to tackle the most dangerous of environments. If there was a radioactive wasteland that needed to be claimed or cleansed in the name of the Emperor, it was the holy duty and honor of the Death Korps to oblige.

Training in the Rad during week seven had been challenging for the Conscripts of PLU1B-03PLU2. He had never seen Krieg's surface in person. The pict-viewers had shown him images before, even images of Krieg before the civil war when it was supposedly forested, but the reality of what had become of his home world was eye opening.

Krieg's surface was a dead one. The sky was a lazy pink, and low rolling green clouds hovered in the air, blotting out the dim sun. Just as Krieg's underground hives were continually lit, so was Krieg's surface continually shadowy and dark.

Through a transit hall that led to a topside bunker they had been driven, and then on foot had marched out into the wasteland. As far as the eye could see was mud. Layers and layers of mud that dipped and rose in a scattering of slimy craters. It was a brown dingy mud and vapors could be seen rising from it to add to the general murkiness of the planet's surface.

Everything was moist, but not with water. Acidic radioactive rain fell frequently and saturated the earth, leaving deadly pools that the conscripts had been advised to avoid. Just looking at the pools dotting the tortured landscape made him itch as surely as the gray blanket he curled up in at night.

The conscripts were in standard dress for hostile combat situations. Opposed to [REDACTED] cheery [REDACTED] combat situations he supposed. They had on their combat attire, iron gray stormcoats, full rebreather masks, thick gloves and knee high rubber boots. Inside the rebreather mask was a microbead so that vocal communication amongst the men was possible. Callum had an actual vox slung on his back which had attachments leading to his rebreather mask for any long distance chatting. To him they all looked somewhat alien with their lenses, shell helmets, and hosing.

"Three Five Oh, copy?" came Hauster's voice grinding into Jagg's ear.

"Copy, Sergeant."

"Section one and two are heading north together. Three and four are taking right and left flank. You trail behind. Make sure you aren't being followed. If any of the sections get into a firefight, you move to assist. Balls out. I'll be watching from overhead. Don't screw this up, I won't have my conscripts lose out to Sergeant Urdentine [REDACTED]'s lot."

Overhead a floating servo skull hummed and its socket lenses adjusted. It whizzed off elsewhere as somewhere far below Krieg's surface the Sergeant watched from the comfort of a chair.

Everyone was armed, but with clumsy weapons which shot out an electronic pulse. The pulse would cause the microbead of an enemy to screech and a shutdown of their own weapon. The war games were on.

"Section five, positions on me. Bunderson, hang back a bit just in case the boys from [REDACTED] B-02 [REDACTED] get clever," Jagg spoke and his microbead sent his voice into the ears of his section.

Meanwhile Callum tended to the vox-caster and listened in for orders from Hauster, or calls from the other section leaders.

His section spread out as instructed and they waited for the other sections to slog ahead some distance before they began to follow. It was slow going, each step resulting in a boot sinking into acidic mud. A straight path could not be followed, for the larger acid pools were something they had to bypass. While the war games were fought with fake weaponry, Krieg's environment was deadly and real.

He scanned around, and he blinked a few times to clear sweat from his eyes. The rebreather smelled bad, was humid and cut down his vision. There was no alternative however and he solaced himself in the fact that B-02's conscripts were equally hindered.

An hour of slow marching and the occasional voxed check in revealed nothing.

Callum then spoke, "I have the Sergeant. He says the enemy has been sighted by recon craft digging in to the north east." Callum paused, "Sections are all adjusting."

"Copy, Callum. Keep them all appraised. Section five, positions all on me. Slight detour. Hostiles ahead, possibly digging in." Jagg spoke into his microbead and moved in the appropriate direction.

There was no recon, it was just Hauster playing the role of the Imperial navy. The sergeant had warned them however that unless you saw it, you shouldn't truly believe it.

It wasn't long before they heard from over a heap of mud high pitched zapping sounds. The practice weapons were being fired. He could see nothing beyond the muddy hill, and a quick guess made him figure scaling it would not only expose his section, but also take too long. Where there was sound there was trouble and sure enough Callum confirmed it.

"Section one and two under fire. Section three and four unable to properly flank," Callum intoned and cocked his helmeted head his way.

"Copy. Callum, advise section leaders we are on the way heading to right flank. Section five positions on me. Bunderson form up with the rest of us. Hot zone ahead."

Jagg waved his section to the right as a flurry of voices said, "Copy" in his ear. They began to make their way around the heap of steaming mud, but like all progress through Krieg's topside, it was slow going. Hurrying might lead you into a slippery crater and a fatal acid bath. Mud spattered Jagg's gray stormcoat and his boots made sucking sounds as he tried to keep a swift, but safe pace. The electronic squealing grew louder.

Stomping together section five rounded the hill and he saw a typical firefight. Sections one, two, three and four, had formed a half moon formation and were clustered about packs of mud, or lying in shallow ditches, or inside craters devoid of acid. The enemy, conscripts of [REDACTED] B-02 [REDACTED] whose helmets were a delightful shade of yellow, opposed to [REDACTED] B-03 [REDACTED]'s jaunty red, were spread out in a line behind a hastily built mudpack. The dips and folds in the wasteland had allowed the opposing sides to close within one hundred yards of one another before movement became difficult. In cover a soldier suited up for such a hostile environment was a hard target to hit. Moving however was dangerous. The mud made things slow and turned anyone trying to maneuver into an easy target.

A quick survey revealed to Jagg that both sides had already taken casualties, the troopers had their weapons held in the air and were standing, signifying they were dead. Soon as [REDACTED] B-02 [REDACTED]'s men spotted section five, it would mean going to ground and inching forward in a fight of attrition.

"Section five, we are on the flank, almost in the middle of this mess. Follow me, we'll see if we can slip behind the enemy. Soon as you sense we've been spotted, hole up and sing out," Jagg breathed into his microbead.

He hunkered down and crept through the mud in an effort to lead his section fully around the firefight and into [REDACTED] B-02 [REDACTED]'s rear.

The pace was agonizingly slow, but Jagg knew quick movement might just get them spotted quicker or send them into a pit of green, vaporous, acid.

Section five was just edging into █{PU1}█B-02█{PU2}█'s rear when Kellen Raous hissed, "They see us! Down!"

There wasn't time to get his opinion on the matter. The squad sought cover in a flurry of motion that sent up sprays of mud. Moments later the high pitched electronic whines could be heard from █{PU1}█B-02█{PU2}█'s toy guns.

He slid himself behind a mound of mud and leaned around it to try and take aim. With the full rebreather kit on aiming was made difficult. While targeting a stationary object that wasn't shooting back, one had the time to hold a breath and aim. Jagg didn't risk exposing himself more than a second or two. He squeezed the trigger of his zap gun and it whined as it sent invisible pulses towards █{PU1}█B-02█{PU2}█. Back behind cover Jagg dipped and looked over Keyser's way.

Through the microbead he spoke, "Mr. Heavy, suppress them. They've got their hands full with the other sections and won't be able to spare many men for us. Positions eight and seven, stick with Mr. Heavy. The rest of you, on my signal."

Keyser slammed his replica heavy stubber atop a mud pile and made himself a small target by lying down and easing most his form behind the mud. The fake weaponry lacked recoil and so Keyser gently swayed the weapon back and forth, but the high pitched sound it made was continuous and steady.

He risked another glance around the cover he had chosen and noted that █{PU1}█B-02█{PU2}█'s conscripts were trying to fall back and reposition. They must have been unhappy with section five deep on their flank. Good. Jagg thought. Let them run.

"Section five. Advance! Advance!"

Up from cover most of section five sprang, though two remained with Keyser, whose weapon hummed away. Jagg slogged ahead firing as he

went and he heard the sounds of other false weapons sending out their pulses. Ahead [REDACTED]B-02[REDACTED] conscripts fell back to prevent themselves from getting surrounded, but as they stood to give up ground the pulses from the other sections began to take their toll. Jagg's advance chased the men of [REDACTED]B-02[REDACTED] into the open. Between Keyser's simulated heavy stubber and the other sections' work a host of casualties were inflicted in a fine bit of crossfire.

Things were going extraordinarily well when Jagg heard the squeal in his earpiece. At the same time Callum cursed as he too became a casualty. Baffled, Jagg looked ahead to see what enemy had claimed him. He heard Hauster's voice break into his microbead unexpectedly.

"Congratulations, Seven Three Three. If this was real, you'd have a bullet in your head for mowing down your own section leader and vox-man. You fat, stupid, ass. You might as well take off your rebreather right now and take a healthy sip from one of the acid craters. Three Five Oh, you and your vox-man, get your asses back to the bunker. War is over for you. Let's see how section five does without you," Hauster's words were in all their ears and then abruptly quit.

"You shot me, Keyser. You shot me and Callum. In the back no less. Thank you, Mr. Heavy." Jagg shook his head and kicked at the mud.

It was just a war game, but he felt so close to victory, even if it was a fictional one. Having it denied him was as unpleasant as a belt from Hauster.

"I got promoted!" Kellen Raous jeered to the dull humorous, "Hooray" of the remaining section.

"I am so, so sorry. I am. I tried to aim it between you guys. I guess like in real life, this thing wanders a bit," Keyser said morosely.

"Sh*t." Was all Jagg could come up with.

To which Callum sighed, "Sh*t indeed." He un-slung his vox, and tossed it to Kellen Raous.

The two began to pace their way back to the bunker as the fake war went on without them.

Without the vox, the range between Jagg and his section became such that he could no longer hear them on the microbead. Without the vox nearby to amplify the signal, not even Hauster could break into Jagg's ear. It was an unexpected benefit of sorts.

"Friendly fire isn't eh?" Callum said. Close as he was, bead to bead conversation was possible.

"If the sergeant leaves anything of Keyser, I'm going to give him the once over. I'd like to think if we were live and hot that he wouldn't risk something as crazy as that. If we go to war-"

"When we go." Callum interrupted.

"When we go to war, the last thing I want to do is get killed by my own man. All this training, all this drill, only to suddenly have the back of your head explode because some trooper can't shoot straight. Not exactly the death of a Man of Krieg."

He tromped through the mud and groaned angrily as his boots more than once became stuck and needed some wrenching. The bunker was perhaps an hour's hard slog away. He looked across the slope of a landscape and turned his goggled vision up to the pink and green acidic sky.

"Hard to imagine that some people live topside."

"Yeah, Krieg is a sandwich," Callum nodded.

"Sandwich? I don't follow."

"A sandwich. Bread on both ends, but the best stuff is in the middle. I mean look at me. I was raised in the deep levels. It's pretty scary down there. Lots of tattooed women, broken down drunks, and feral packs of eight year olds. Ever been chased by thirty five eight year olds wielding broken bottles?"

Callum's features were hidden but Jagg could tell he was smiling. He continued, "Then you got your middle. Nice levels. Well nice enough. Your level didn't sound so bad and Khuler had it quite good the way he goes on about his ma. Then it's topside. Back to the bread. But looking at this place, I'd happily live all my days on the deepest level than spend my time up here. I pity whoever lives in the Rad. You think we really did this? I mean all this. To ourselves?"

Jagg shrugged as he took another difficult step through the acid drenched mud.

"In schola I was taught the enemy did it, in spite. Hauster says we did it. Better to turn a world to this, than to let the foe have it. Makes you wonder?"

"Wonder what? If it was right to do? I imagine if the stories are at least partially true, then all this was forest, and there were cities, and hives, and towns, and villages. Now this?"

Callum knelt down and with a gloved hand picked up a steaming pile of Krieg's surface, he let it drop in wet smoldering clumps. "If this is victory, I don't want it."

"Heresy that is. I wouldn't go around thinking aloud too often, Callum. You've listened to Hauster. The Death Korps bring death or victory, it matter not which. The alternative must be something worse than this."

Jagg turned to look at Callum, warning him slightly. It was just talk, but talk like that could get the attentions of Hauster's fist or even the mysterious Commissar Shtall. There was no "middle ground" in the Imperium, especially not in the Death Korps.

"Heretics." Came a new voice on the microbead.

Callum and Jagg tensed up and both crouched and leveled their electronic weapons. The move was pure instinct and both realized the stupidity of it a moment later. Jagg looked about in quick wide arcs as he was taught, trying to compensate for the restricted vision of the rebreather goggles.

Laughter, came over the bead and four shapes rounded a pile of mud. They were fellow conscripts, clad in heavy storm coats that were spattered in radioactive mud. Their helms were painted red, and their fake weapons were slung over their shoulders. He looked the four over, but a man in combat attire, wearing a fully enclosed rebreather, looked much like anyone else. Judging by their helmets however they were conscripts of [REDACTED] B-03 [REDACTED].

"Are you casualties?" He warily asked and Callum stepped to the side as the four slowly advanced upon them.

"Yeah. Zap. Zap. Dead. Which is going to be a far cry better than what you're going to be. Grab them. Pull their masks off and let them breathe in Krieg's toasty air," said one of the men and he suddenly recalled the voice. It was Five Six Five.

"Bunderson!" Jagg called out and he took a cautious step back while Callum moved a bit further to the side, stumbling a bit in the mud.

"If this is about me kneeing you in the groin, well you deserved it the way-

"Shut up! This is about more than that. Day one we got here and you had to show off in front of Sergeant Hauster. Had to get us in trouble. You jumped up piece of trash. You made a real good show of it. You think because you're Hauster's favorite that you can act any way you want? I don't [REDACTED] think so, section leader. Little maggots like you and Khuler and your slum level friend there are going to learn how Krieg really works. The strong rule. You never should have been made section leader."

He mentally reeled, unaware of what Bunderson was on about. Something clicked in his memory.

"You dressed incorrectly. It's about that? You have to be kidding."

Bunderson hissed, "All of us. The oldest. We should have been made section leaders, but you had to show off. If you followed our lead, we all would have got a chewing out and that would be that. I'd be section leader,

you'd be an ammo bitch. You stupid grox. Even after we warned you and your bed mate there, taking your kit, you still had to show off. Always trying to make Sergeant Hauster proud. Well to hell with you and him. He'll need a new section leader soon as he finds out your equipment malfunctioned." The four boys, led by Bunderson trudged ever closer, their hands held in a combat stance.

"Why am I your friend?" Callum sighed over the bead to Jagg. He called out loudly, "Come on then. Lets see if my elders can teach me a thing or two." He circled through the mud and clenched his fists.

He couldn't believe the sheer stupidity of it. Bunderson believed he should be section leader? That being section leader was somehow the mark of Hauster's favor? All that the position had gotten him was a near daily beating, both physical and verbal, for weeks on end. He entered a hand to hand stance. The Death Korps trained its conscripts in only the rudimentary aspects of hand to hand combat. The reality was that a good majority of the Emperor's foes were better at eye to eye combat than any human. The Death Korps, always practical, emphasized using terrain to prevent close quarters fighting from occurring and the liberal use of grenades, pistols, and flamers when it came to taking enemy strongholds. Hauster had pointed to his own torn up face and had said numerous times that a fist fight with an ork, was not a proper use of one's abilities.

Lacking a weapon, he was deeply worried. It was four on two and the four were all bigger than Callum and himself. Circling wide, Callum lured off two, as did Jagg. Bunderson growled and charged towards him, lowering his shoulders as if to ram.

The charge the bigger boy made was slow and clumsy, easy to see, predict and plot. He felt even a touch of a smile when he saw how slow his attacker was. He then tried to side step, and found that the mud wouldn't release his boots in time. Just as one boot slid free Bunderson crashed into him. Onto his back he was forced in a spray of dingy slop. He felt his attacker atop him. The larger boy was trying to get his gloved fingers around his rebreather hose, which extended from where his mouth was and led to a pack of oxygen at his side. If Bunderson could damage it, then Krieg's hot, poisonous air would sear his lungs. In a panic he kicked and

squirmed, crying out. In terror he scooped up a pile of mud and dashed it into the boy's mask. The mud coated Bunderson's goggles and he raised both hands to clear the obstruction away.

Quick as he could Jagg placed his hands on Bunderson's shoulders and slid away. With a pop he came free from under the elder's weight and in a series of frantic kicks was able to get himself standing, just in time to see Bunderson's companion rushing in.

There was no time to move, no time to be agile and avoid the rush, so he held his hands out and waited. He felt the other boy collide with him and pivoted. The mud was slick and so the two spun swiftly and with a heaving push he hurled the unknown boy onto the wet earth. His attacker was face down in the mud, but Bunderson had cleared his goggles and was on his feet again.

He contemplated simply running. A run back to the bunker and the safety of Hauster, Emperor help him for even considering Hauster safe. Pride burned within him to stay, but he was fully willing to let pride drop. He could handle being a coward for the day, that is, if it was only his own life in danger. He saw Callum squaring off against two red helmeted foes and saw no way in which he could escape. Since Bunderson and the rest could hear everything they said to one another, planning was out of the question as well. As the older boy seethed and charged in again, Jagg reluctantly made the decision to stand and fight.

Bunderson swept in through the mud and his ally planted his hands in the earth and raised his masked head, getting ready to stand back up. He saw an opportunity; he took three long strides towards the two. His foe paused, caught off guard and crouched defensively, while his companion tilted his head in confusion. He delivered a thunderous kick to the prone boy's face. The rubbery mask dented and his head snapped back loudly. Over the bead he heard a scream followed by a gurgle at which point the conscript collapsed.

"I'll kill you!" screamed Bunderson and in a fury he stomped towards him, passing by his downed ally.

Bunderson hammered into Jagg and swung with his fists in meaty strikes. He tried to block and to retreat, but the older boy was too strong and too close to do either. Through his heavy uniform he felt the strikes. Bunderson grabbed his coat and hurled him once more upon his back. Before he could scramble away the boy straddled him and slammed him deeper into the mud with his hands.

"I'll kill you!" Bunderson roared in triumph and brought his hands in to rip apart Jagg's rebreather.

Jagg gave out a scream that he knew sounded anything but brave.

A streak of red collided with Bunderson's head and he reeled. It took him a second to realize that what had hit Bunderson was a shell shaped combat helm. He rolled to the side and brought himself atop the fallen conscript, reversing their roles. The bigger boy was dazed and he stared down at him unsure what to do.

"Him or you Jagg! It's him or you," Callum yelled out over the bead.

He looked to the side and saw that Callum had tossed his own helmet at Bunderson. His rebreather was all encompassing and looked more like a hood than a mask. Callum's two opponents were still pressing him, forcing him back and trying to bring the fight to the slick ground.

Callum made an exasperated gesture, "Come on Jagg! do it! Do it! Kill him! NOW!"

Trembling in fear Jagg looked down at his stunned foe and grasped his helmet and rebreather. With a scream of rage he yanked the helm off and forced the rebreather off, pulling and tearing at it madly.

Pale-faced, his broken nose leaking blood, Bunderson looked up at Jagg with dark eyes. His mouth moved and his eyes widened and a terrible sound issued out from his throat. He thrashed and shrieked. A terrible cold sensation plunged into his soul. The older boy pushed Jagg off of him and rose. He was still making that awful sound and ran in jerking directionless steps.

Callum's foes suddenly stopped their attack and everyone watched as the exposed conscript wailed in agony. His gloved hands grasped at his own face and throat. He spun around, swinging at nothing. Tumbling and stumbling the elder youth ran a few more paces then toppled over a mud embankment. There was another scream that rose in pitch then gurgled and died. An eerie, long silence, followed.

"We don't know who you are. It was Bunderson's idea wasn't it. All his and not yours. Take your friend and go. We didn't see you here, you didn't see us here," Callum said breaking the silence.

The two allies of Bunderson didn't speak, but shared looks. They cautiously walked over to the youth who Jagg had kicked in the face. They knelt and picked him up by his arms and walked away, dragging the unconscious conscript through the slick earth.

Callum waited till they were gone then retrieved his helmet.

"Can't believe they did that. Tried to kill us. Our own men? Twice in one day! One for real," he shook his head, refastened his helm and through goggled vision looked at Jagg. "You alright?" Callum asked.

He shook and sniffled, "No. God-Emperor no. I- I- He's dead Callum. I killed him. I have to see." Jagg took a few steps in the direction Bunderson stumbled but Callum gripped Jagg's shoulder.

"No. You don't need to see. Bunderson was going to kill us both. Hell, if I was half the basta*rd Hauster wanted me to be, I would have done them all in myself. You didn't do wrong Jagg. Come on lets go."

He shook the hand off his shoulder and walked towards the embankment. He followed Bunderson's heavy foot prints then looked over the rise and down. Bunderson floated in a pool of sickly green liquid. Smoke rose from his body as the crater of acid slowly ate away at him. Jagg trembled and made the sign of the Aquila. His first kill. His first kill and it had been a human. No, not a human. Bunderson. A fellow conscript. A boy in his section. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be a dead alien in the pit, or a heretic. Not Bunderson. Not one of his own.

Callum drew Jagg away, "Jagg. Jagg. Come on. Achim!"

Achim Jagg turned to regard Callum, though he could see nothing but tinted goggles and an inhuman looking hosed mask. With a dull nod he let Callum lead him to the bunker.

"We don't tell anyone," Callum insisted as they entered the bunker and stomped through its mud-trekked floors to the changing chambers. "Not a soul. Not even a priest."

"For a fellow who decried Krieg's scouring, you now want to lie about murder? I don't understand you, Callum." Jagg tried to get a grip on himself, to not cry, as images of Bunderson gasping, screaming, and boiling from within swept through his mind on loop.

"I have my reasons. A bit of mercy." Callum apparently felt Jagg stiffen at the word "mercy" and continued, "We tell the sergeant what happened, then there will be hell to pay. He'll find out who the other three were and then we'll at last meet the infamous Commissar Shtall. It's better this way. We don't say a word, they don't say a word. Last we saw Five Six Five-"

"Bunderson. His name, was Bunderson."

Callum spoke faster, "Last we saw Bunderson was with the rest of the section after we became casualties. That's it, end of story. Let the sergeant figure the rest out. If they find him, there won't be much left and it will be written off as an accident. Five Si...Bunderson fell into acid. Damn. Bad luck."

Callum shook Jagg, "He was going to kill you and me. You know that don't you?"

"Yes. YES! It's just. I didn't want it that way," Jagg responded as they entered the changing room of the bunker.

They both shut a metal door and Jagg's gloved hand pressed a few buttons on a keypad. Air cycled out, then from above decontaminating liquids washed their uniforms clean. The process was a lengthy one and jets of liquid sprayed from all directions as the deadly remnants of Krieg were washed away and the uniforms soaked, dried, soaked, and dried again. An exit door hissed open and emitted a gust of steam. Back into the overly-lit subterranean world of Krieg the two walked.

Other casualties of the war games were to be found in a waiting room designated for [REDACTED]B-03[REDACTED]. The "dead" were chatting and lounging about with little else to do. Jagg and Callum removed their helmets, hung them from their belts, and pulled off their rebreather hoods. Cold sterile air felt good after a couple of hours sweltering within the confines of the rebreather. Jagg slumped himself into an empty chair and hung his head in his hands. He hardly noticed Callum beside him. He didn't look up either as more men returned from the Rad. Knowing that three amongst them had tried to kill him earlier was unsettling.

"The conscripts will get on their feet!" Hauster barged into the waiting room his eyes blazing as hot and bright as Krieg's overhead lighting.

The conscripts hopped to attention and Hauster walked through the room shaking his head from side to side.

"A week out from graduation. A week out and what have I got? You sniveling lumps of meat! I have your butcher's bill. Seventeen dead from enemy fire. Three others dead from friendly fire. And one of you sh*tts has actually gone missing. Ohhhh you are in for a fine night tonight. Be thankful you won this simulation. [REDACTED]B-02[REDACTED] will be by day's light praying for their rebreather equipment to fail them.

They'll be camping in the Rad for their loss. But that doesn't make you soldiers. You won. And you won messy. Get yourselves to the Chimeras I have waiting in the service bay. By section mount up, full attire for combat in a hostile situation. Masks, helmets, coats, boots, gloves, the works. The conscripts will spend this eve on the obstacle course until such a time comes that I have deemed you able to get from point A to B without tripping over your own feet! Get moving.

No, not you, Three Five Oh, come here," Hauster said and crooked his finger.

Jagg froze as his number was called out. He glanced at Callum who could only offer a small shrug before donning his rebreather hood and helmet. The conscripts marched out. It seemed as if Callum was going to stay, as

were the rest of section five. Jagg made his way over to Hauster trying to hide any looks of guilt upon his features.

Sergeant Hauster looked past Jagg and turned a crimson shade, "Were the Conscripts ordered to stare longingly at their section leader? Having shot him in the back this day, I can't see as to why they would. Oh, do not think I've forgotten that! Now go!" Section five paused for only a second more before departing, leaving Hauster and Jagg alone in the waiting room.

Hauster stared at Jagg long and hard, then he started to circle him, like some bird of prey. He didn't talk at first, but just walked, around and around. Jagg for his part swallowed and stared ahead while standing at attention.

"You lost a man, Three Five Oh. Not simulated either. Up in the Rad one of yours has been left behind. Now why is that?" Hauster halted with a stomp of his boot and leaned in close to Jagg.

"I don't know, Sergeant," Jagg blurted out, which was a half-truth. He still didn't know why Bunderson wanted to steal his kit, then later kill him over what was truly a thankless job. It was irrational for Bunderson to covet the section leader position.

"Don't know? Don't know?! You are responsible for your section. I don't care if you were out of the simulation or not. Your men. Your duty. It is your task to know where they are. Five Six Five, hasn't come back. Five Six Five, is still topside. He may be wounded. He might be dead. He will be dead if he's not found soon. I can't have a section leader, even that of a Conscript Platoon, fail. Not like that, Three Five Oh. I told you. Remember? No second chances. None."

Hauster's pistol came out in a flash and Jagg sucked in a breath as he felt the cold muzzle against his head. The click came a moment later.

"Serg-"

"Don't speak," Hauster barked and pushed the weapon's cold barrel into Jagg's skull.

"I have to blow your brains out, Three Five Oh. This is a great disappointment to me. I'd almost regret it, except for the fact that the best you can muster up for a missing man is, I don't know!"

Jagg felt tears run down his cheeks and he looked wide eyed at Hauster and his revolver. His jaw moved and he saw the sergeant's finger coil about the trigger. It was not a noble act that made Jagg spit out the truth. It wasn't a sense of guilt, or duty. It was animalistic fright. To his most primitive functions it was the only thing that might delay his own death, even if for only as long as it took to tell the story.

When Jagg had confessed everything a loud click made him jump. It wasn't the gun going off, it was Hauster pointing the weapon up in the air and returning the cocking hammer into place.

He holstered the weapon and spat, "What is your job, Three Five Oh?"

"I'm section leader, sergeant. Leader of section five," Jagg said nervously and strained to keep his eyes forward and his trembling to a minimum.

"That's correct, Three Five Oh. Section leader. Responsible for your men's lives. And why? What is the purpose? Think you mother-raised scab. Your sacred duty is to what?" Hauster circled again, but kept one hand on the butt of his pistol, as if at any moment he might carry out the execution after all.

Jagg almost answered something along the lines that it was his task to keep the men safe, but that wasn't true. That wasn't ever mentioned at all. Jagg belted out what he remembered from the day he was assigned as section leader.

"I'm to ensure the section performs!"

"Who is important?"

"No one. The section is important!"

"Did Five Six Five, serve the section?"

"Well, no but-"

Hauster roared, "No buts! No excuses! No reasoning behind it Jagg!" it was the first time the battle hardened sergeant had used his name.

"The sacred duty of each man is to serve the section, the section serves the platoon, the platoon serves the kompanie the kompanie serves the battalion, the battalion serves the regiment, up and up all the way to the distant High Lords of Terra. It is a sacred duty. To violate it is to break one's faith with the Imperium. The chain of command is why there is an Imperium!

Does our history teach you nothing?! Krieg is a wasteland because one man sought to break that chain. He tried to make himself the sole master of this world. And the world paid for it. We are fortunate there is a world left at all. We seek redemption in battle and yet you whimper and shirk from what must be done?

That piece of sh*t you finished off sought to make himself master of your section. His betrayal is the deepest and darkest of sins. Better to shoot all your men in the head than let a boy like that take control. You understand?"

"Yes, Sergeant!" Jagg's mind reeled. He had killed one of his own. He was a soldier, or was going to be one and so death was a part of the trade. It was a part of the quest for redemption. Yet it felt wrong. Wasteful. Cruel.

Hauster seemed to sense Jagg's reluctance and said, "I don't believe you. You think too much when you don't need to and not enough when you do. Use your damn brain. Your failure Jagg is clear. Oh yes. You did fail, but not in the removal of Five Six Five. You let the others off the meat hook. That is your failure. Three other men are out there who don't respect the chain of command. Three traitors in the making. And that's all it takes to lead to the greatest of horrors for mankind. I'm tempted to bring this up with Commissar Shtall. He'll have the whole platoon shot. Better you are all dead and the three traitors stopped now before they cause trouble. Trouble that might one day see a world burnt up and turned to a smoking pile of waste."

Hauster stood before Jagg and shook his head, "No second chances. So what am I to do, Three Five Oh?"

Jagg shook his head no. A distant sense of sympathy for Bunderson became a quick and fiery hate. That dead ass, who was hopefully ooze right now, was going to get them all killed even after death. Jagg cursed himself for not ordering Callum to keep up the fight, to finish it then and there. He had been weak, merciful and the price of mercy was too much. Jagg stared at Hauster's intense eyes.

"Sergeant. I'll. I-I- I'll fulfill my duty. I'll take care of them. I'll find them. I'll do it. I'll get rid of the weakness in our platoon. I'll shoot them myself, Sergeant."

Hauster stared a long while then grunted, "The right answer, Three Five Oh. Just maybe the true spirit of our holy duty is dawning upon you at last. Three men, three traitors are amongst us, a threat to humanity. But you don't need them found. One is wounded, brought in by the other two. You think I didn't notice that? I know their numbers."

"But why didn't you just tell me that? You wanted to shoot the platoon! You know who the weak links are," Jagg pleaded while keeping stiff and at attention.

"Just when I think you are smart, you do something to make me curse myself for even having the inclination you've got some brain power beyond that of simple vermin. I was making sure there were not four weak links in the platoon. I see there is just the three. I'm having those men taken to Commissar Shtall. You will have to fill out a report. This has to be done officially. They must be dealt with, you understand?"

Jagg nodded and felt conflicting relief and apprehension. His duty was clear though. Hauster was right, as he had been all along. The group was important, not the individual. Bunderson. No. Five Six Five and his companions had taken it upon themselves to put their own petty needs ahead of the platoon's. In a way they had placed their own needs ahead of the human race by compromising its soliders.

"Yes, Sergeant, I'll fill out whatever must be filled out. Sergeant, when will I have to shoot them?" Jagg shook his head and corrected himself, "When can I shoot them?"

"You can't. But I am pleased you are willing to do so. In the field you can pop whoever you have to, to see to it that the section operates. But this is official now Jagg. The Commissar has his duty to perform."

Hauster reached a hand out and Jagg braced for the strike. Instead the rough fingers pulled at Jagg's ear. A light tug.

"Remember this day Jagg. Put it good and clear in your head. There are billions of men in the Imperial Guard and in them, millions of Five Six Five's. Most soldiers don't learn that lesson early as this. Many don't live past the lesson as a Five Six Five knifes them in the back. But you know now. You know what to do to ensure this place, our home, OUR Krieg, is redeemed. You will see to it that our mistakes aren't repeated.

Now get to the Chimera. Your section is down yet another man, and for you, it is going to be not only a long night, but an especially painful one. Good work."

Jagg managed a nod and a "Yes, Sergeant," before jogging off to reunite with section five. His heart still thudded, his mind still raced and he gave a nervous laugh for his own benefit. He realized Hauster had threatened to kill him and the whole platoon, promised to beat him, and then complimented him, all in the course of a single conversation. Jagg hurried himself to the Chimera as he entered the service bay, Hauster's dark revelation firmly fixed in his mind.

Of the billions, there were millions who if not stopped could very well see an innocent man killed, armies ruined, and worlds vaporized. The human race had enough to contend with the more obvious enemies of mankind who were at least honest enough to not pose as friends. For the first time Jagg started to truly grasp what it was to be in the Death Korps.

Come morning, three men of [REDACTED]B-03[REDACTED] had vanished from the barracks. No one paid it any mind, no one inquired about them or their clean and empty bunks. Not out loud at least. Week eight was upon them. As the final week came upon the conscripts a giddy sense of excitement and fear permeated them. They felt excitement because they were at last going to become true men of Krieg. However, fear because Commissar Shtall was going to observe their final week of combat routines and indoctrinate them on the proper way to address officers and understand the chain of command.

On the parade ground outside [REDACTED]Bitch Ot Three[REDACTED] the conscripts stood in standard dress for a non-combat situation. Of the forty nine original members of the platoon, forty four remained. Bunderson and his three cronies had perished in the Rad, or vanished. One had died in a live fire exercise. Someone from section one had failed to throw a grenade. Jagg didn't see the incident, but heard that the trooper pulled the pin and just held onto the grenade with both hands. Most assumed it was a suicide. That or it was a terminal case of stupidity.

Commissar Shtall arrived in a matt black staff transport which silently rolled up to greet the conscripts. Shtall sat in the back of the wheeled vehicle and an assistant junior Commissar opened the door for him. Shtall stepped out and made an immediate impression.

He was tall, rail thin, and bent over with stooped shoulders. He wore a heavy black storm coat, decorated with silver skulls and golden chains of office. Upon his head he wore a peaked cap and the imagery of the Commissariat was leafed in gold above the black glossy brim. His face was withered and old, and a pair of wire rimmed spectacles sat on the end of his hooked nose. He appeared to be bald, or perhaps his hair was just so thin and white it could not be seen.

With hands behind his back Commissar Shtall paced towards the young men of [REDACTED]B-03[REDACTED], his glossy knee high boots clicking with every step upon the slab. He made an impression all right. While Hauster emanated

power, terror, and brutality, Commissar Shtall had an aura of cold calculated death about him.

Sergeant Hauster stood at attention before the sections and saluted as the Commissar approached. Shtall returned the salute then glanced over his thin shoulder to the junior adjunct which followed him. The junior Commissar knew instantly what to do and produced a data slate.

"I believe some time alone is needed between myself and these conscripts. At ease and dismissed, Sergeant." Shtall's voice was a rasping hiss that blew past thin lips. Quiet words, but in the stillness of the moment and with the way sound echoed and amplified inside Krieg's subterranean hives, everyone could hear him quite clearly. Shtall's eyes, which looked to be gray, or perhaps a pale blue, slid over to inspect the sections and he walked past Hauster paying him no further mind.

"Yes, Commissar." Hauster saluted, turned on a heel and marched back to the confines of {PU1}B-03{PU2}, leaving the platoon alone with Shtall and his assistant.

"I am Commissar Shtall. My task is to indoctrinate you into the formalities of the Death Korps. Ultimately my purpose is to ensure the loyalty and morale of this world's fighting men. Rank and structure is the mortar, which holds the rockrete wall together. The chain of command is sacred and to violate it, is to deny His will. I need not remind you what we do with heretics and rouges." Shtall paced between the sections. Whereas Hauster roamed in quick stout strides, Shtall seemed to simply float, ghosting between the sections before gliding in front of them, tilting his head to the side to better see them, while his gloved hands remain clasped behind his back.

"You have by now all read your Uplifting Primer and should know most of what I am going to tell you. You are a few days away from becoming true men of Krieg. Your superiors eagerly await your integration into the Imperial Guard so that you may best use your life, to further His cause. " The thin lips formed something that perhaps was a smile, but it was gone before Jagg could truly tell.

"You will be foot troopers of a section, under a sergeant. Your sergeant will report to the lowest ranking officer, a leutnant, who commands the platoon. Your platoon will have anywhere as few as two and up to five sections. The leutnant reports to the hauptmann who will command several platoons in the kompanie. He reports to the Major who commands the battalion. The head of your regiment, made up of a few battalions is the Grosse-Kapitän. You, list the ranks." The Commissar's gloved hand pointed a crooked finger at section four's leader.

The youth straightened and responded, "Yes, Commissar. The ranks are, trooper, sergeant who is the NCO, leutnant, who is the CO, hauptmann, major and kapitän of the regiment. The kapitän will be directed by High Command. Several regiments of Krieg will be -"

"Let us speak realistically. How often are several regiments of Krieg used in the same area? Who will command the kapitän most likely? In real terms my boy?" The black clad member of the Commissariat interrupted.

"Sub-Sector Lord, Commissar? And he will appoint a General, Lord General, or Lord General Militant," The youth asked as much as stated a touch timidly.

"Yes. Good. You've read up! Don't ever expect more than a regiment or two in a combat zone. The Imperium isn't fond of letting men of Krieg march en-masse. Ah! Saluting is simple. Indoors, you do not salute, lest you are reporting to a commissioned officer. Outdoors in non-combat situations you do salute, when reporting, when just walking on by. Exceptions?" The Commissar pointed his finger at Jagg.

Jagg straightened, and cleared his throat, "Yes, Commissar! The exceptions are; do not salute when in ranks. Do not salute when operating a vehicle."

"Do you salute Commissars?"

"Yes, Commissar! But I am in rank."



Shtall's hint of a smile returned and he eased his way between the sections once more and spoke softly, "The Imperial Guard is of course cluttered with other ranks. When you go off world you will find different planets have their own way of doing things. It comes with the trade my boys. However, I shall teach you to best navigate the quandary of Imperial bureaucracy and how to maintain the formalities of the chain of command. It is tedious and boring. And it may save your life. So don't nod off while standing.

If your regiment comes under the command of, oh say, a General from Kronodus, did you know his staff officers will shoot you if you don't salute him in time? Something about respect in their culture that demands immediate acknowledgement of who is in charge. Meanwhile if you don't salute the cooks from the Guard regiment from Illaxrian, they spit in your food. So, to avoid death or additives in your meal, listen close...."

Jagg stayed awake, but had to agree with the Commissar that it was boring. There were quartermasters, log masters, ship masters, lock masters, sentries, police, Planetary Defense Forces, sergeants, colonels, captain's, not to be confused with a Kapitän, corporals, lance corporals, the bloody Navy and their ranks, and a dozen other positions to know in the more civilian aspect of the Imperium.

Fortunately the formality of saluting and showing proper deference wasn't too hard to figure out and Shtall's advice eventually came down to,

"When in doubt salute. You'll never get shot for that."

After the lecture, Jagg wasn't as intimidated by the Commissar as he had been. The way Hauster spoke of him, Jagg half expected the old man to just wander up and shoot a few of them for good measure. In the brief time that Jagg had known him, he found the Commissar to be soft spoken, yet still commanding in a way. He was gentle where as Hauster was brusque and downright insulting. After the brief seminar on Imperial guard rank structure, Commissar Shtall reminded the platoon to study up. He then instructed them to wait and went into B-03.

Hauster later exited and adjusted his cap and shouted out, "The conscripts have pleased the Commissar. It seems either you all have decided to take up that habit called reading, or that your ability to interpret crude drawings in the Uplifting Primer is commendable. A happy commissar, is a happy sergeant. Can't you see me smiling?" the exposed teeth were exposed yet further.

"And a happy sergeant means conscripts who will be miserable, instead of tired, hungry and miserable. Get yourselves into the Mess Hall, eat, use the toilet and return to this spot in twenty minutes. It's back to the obstacle course. The Commissar wants to see you perform. Dismissed!"

Kellen Raous whistled as they broke ranks, "Twenty minutes? We must have done something right indeed. That Shtall's not such a bad old fellow after all."

Jagg nodded and said, "Can't argue with that. Though I think the main point is something to do with morale. Right? Commissars are supposed to maintain unit morale. Guess they don't always shoot people to do that."

As they meandered back into {PU1}B-03{PU2}'s Mess Hall Callum grunted, "Let {PU2}s keep Shtall happy then so he doesn't switch to method two."

Food was, as it had been the entire eight weeks, very good. Though in the Death Korps one didn't salute the cooks, if ever Jagg found out who made the protein soups, he'd at least shake their hand. After his meal Jagg and the others assembled out on the parade ground and were quickly scurried into Chimeras. The tracked vehicles sped off to the firing range and obstacle course and unloaded them as they had done plenty of times before.

Hauster had yet again beaten them there, as did Commissar Shtall whose staff car looked strange parked amongst the armored personnel carriers. By section Hauster had the men collect weapons and ammo, and demonstrate their ability to strip down and re-assemble their bolt actions and heavy stubbers. The section leaders had to break down and rebuild their pistols, the bolt actions, and the heavy stubbers. Jagg went through the routine, whispering the proper prayers to the Machine Spirit as he went through the motions without fault.

Target practice went along smoothly as well. Jagg had improved his aim, though he wouldn't call himself an excellent shot. He was fairly confident that he could hit a target from three hundred yards away. Where exactly was another matter.

The obstacle course was the last thing for them to complete. A rigorous course it was and the sections all went over boxes, around them, under wires, over wires, through tunnels, up walls and back again. Shouts and threats were yelled out by the section leaders, inspiring their men to keep up a steady pace. Jagg himself used a few colorful insults he had picked up from Hauster to get his own under strength section performing just as well as the rest, even when manpower was needed; such as in the case of scaling up a large wall. Hauster and Commissar Shtall watched from the sidelines, commenting to one another, while the Commissar's adjunct occasionally marked something down in the data slate he carted.

It was shaping up to be a fine day. Jagg felt like a proper soldier. The platoon was operating like a machine. They marched. They saluted. They fired their weapons. They ran the obstacle course, and they did it right. A fine day indeed.

Jagg took a running leap to the tall flakboard wall he had to scale, and his hands bit into the metal. With a grunt, and the assistance of two others beneath him he hauled himself halfway over it, then laid atop the wall and reached his hand down. Two other members of his section were braced against the wall and using their hands to give the rest of his team a boost up. One after the other ran and launched themselves upon the wall, and Jagg helped them the rest of the way over. When only the two troopers braced against the flakboard were left, one helped the other up. Thompson like Jagg kept the wall straddled and together they lowered their hands. Keyser, the last to go, jumped up with a grunt and between Jagg and Thompson was assisted over the wall. Keyser landed a bit heavily, but didn't tumble. Well practiced in the maneuver Jagg and Thompson slid over the wall and landed easily on the other side amongst the sweat coated section. It had been the third time they had made it over and Jagg was ready to round the course and start again when he heard Khuler's shrill shriek.

A murmur of confusion came from the other side of the wall and Jagg peered around it. A crowd of conscripts were massed in the center of the obstacle course. Curious as the rest Jagg moved towards the crowd and could see Khuler shouting and pointing. A closer look revealed that Khuler was bleeding from the mouth and looking wild eyed up at one of his section members. Like everyone in the platoon, the victim of Khuler's wrath was a larger older boy.

Hauster and Commissar Shtall pushed through the press and upon seeing the dreaded sergeant and black clad commissar the crowd parted rapidly. Murmurs died down and Hauster bellowed, "What the hell do you think you are doing? The conscripts were not ordered to halt their routine!"

"He hit me! I'm section leader and he hit me! I'm bleeding! Look!" Khuler held up his bloody hand and brought it once more to his nose. The blood looked especially crimson on his pale skin. The blue eyed youth turned to the Commissar and saluted.

"Commissar, sir! This man struck me!"

Shtall pursed his lips and shared a glance with Hauster and spoke smoothly and coolly, "Such an act would require execution. Such blatant violation of the chain of command could see the whole platoon fall to pieces. But were you to have been accidentally hit, perhaps by this trooper falling, or his elbow sliding back, then such a thing could be handled with a lash or two? Accidents happen of course."

"No, Commissar sir! He hit me! On purpose. I was telling him what he was doing wrong and he hit me!" Khuler looked around, "You all saw it! I'm section leader!"

"You are indeed. But you see if this trooper did such a thing, he would have to be executed. Here and now. No trial, no imprisonment. Just a shot to the head. You don't want that do you? Think hard. Wasn't it an accident? One you can correct on your own later? " Shtall leaned in and his wispy smile returned but promptly fell when Khuler responded.

"No, Commissar sir! He hit me. I want him to pay. Pay for thinking he can do that. To me! I'm section leader!"

"You've mentioned that. Are you sure?" Shtall said slowly and drew his coat back to reveal a holster and the butt of a laspistol. The accused had blood on his hand and stood still as he watched the exchange. Everyone could tell the Commissar was trying to commute a death sentence to something else, but Khuler would have none of it.

"I am sure, Commissar sir."

"I see." The Commissar drew the modern weapon from his holster and thumbed a switch on it. He raised his eyebrows and abruptly handed the butt of the weapon Khuler's way.

"If you are that sure, then you wouldn't mind doing it yourself. Your man, your problem, right? Now if you don't want to we can-"

Khuler snatched the weapon up and spun. Before the conscript in question could look surprised Khuler had put a red lancing beam into his face. The victim's head turned sharply and everyone jumped back, except the

Commissar and Sergeant Hauster, who looked on without discernable expressions on their faces.

The body of the young man collapsed and his hand twitched involuntarily. Three more snapping sounds came from the laspistol and three bolts of light were thumped into the corpse. A smoking hole appeared in his head, neck, and chest, leaving black scorch marks and the smell of burning meat in the air. Khuler's blue eyes twinkled and the boy, who Jagg no longer saw as a fourteen year old weeping brat on a transport, handed the laspistol back.

The Commissar grasped the weapon and stared in silence at Khuler then looked over the rest of the stunned conscripts.

"Remember this lesson my boys," he said then spun, his coat flaring out and marched to his transport. His adjunct followed along and entered information on a data slate.

"The conscripts will return to the Chimera transports. No. Not you, Three Five Oh. You stay." Hauster waved the rest off.

Jagg couldn't help but notice that people shied away from Khuler. It was almost comical given how small in frame he was. Wiry as the rest, and yet still child-like. But in appearance only. When the Conscripts were gone and Jagg was left alone with Hauster and the dead body the Sergeant shook his head.

"Don't be like that boy. You see the difference between that puke you did in and this?"

Jagg licked his lips, "I think so Sergeant."

"Tell me then, Jagg."

"This man didn't deserve death. He was pushed too far, maybe an accident. The section isn't performing well, not because of him, but because of Khuler," Jagg reasoned out slowly and looked down at the body. It looked surreal. Las wounds didn't bleed quite like Jagg expected. They crushed

and burned and pierced, but didn't bleed. The heat of the weapon must have cauterized the holes in the unfortunate's body.

"Right. Your own men have to respect you. You can scare the sh*t out of them, but if you push so hard they lash out. Push back in another way. You don't help the section if you inflict more casualties than the enemy. Better to have spared the boy's life. Commissar Shtall would have played it up as if he wanted to execute him, but only that brat Khuler's protests were enough to convince him otherwise. Instead"

He glanced at the body then rubbed his jaw.

"Instead we are down another man and when the real world hits, Khuler might find the first shot fired is one in his back. Maybe by a basta*rd like Five Six Five, maybe by a good man pushed too far. Well, he'll learn or he'll die."

Jagg nodded once and soaked in the lesson, but cleared his throat and risked speaking out.

"Sergeant? Why? Why do you tell me these things and not the others?"

The man's burning gaze turned on Jagg and his exposed teeth clacked.

"Why? Heh. Because you got the most brains. And brains can do one of three things. Get you killed because you think too much. Get a whole mess of your people killed, because you think too well. Khuler's like that. And then option three. You think just enough so that the enemy is the one that gets killed the most. You live. Your men live. And they carry on kicking ass in the name of the Golden Throne. Maybe get a little glory and redemption back for us all. You think I've beaten you for fun? Well, maybe a little."

His teeth clacked and he said, "You're iron boy. I've beaten you into a sword. Now get on the Chimera. There's more to do. You're not a Man of Krieg yet."

The last few days of the Call were somber. Training was winding down and more technical indoctrination and ceremony was introduced. There was supposed to be a growing sense of closeness amongst the platoon, but Khuler's actions had made the young men morose, almost introverted.

Sections kept to themselves and pondered what would happen when graduation came. Where would they go? Would they stay together? Would some remain behind for further training? Men had to learn how to drive, fly, cook, organize, and much more. Every Man of Krieg knew how to fight, but not all did the actual fighting. They all pondered and the day grew closer.

Graduation day started with a grand service in the Ministorium. The Lector gave a rousing sermon and led the conscripts in lofty praises. His topics ranged between their duty to the Death Korps and their duty to the future. The values of a father were brought up more than once. A good father ensures his ration card has deductions sent to his wife and child. A good father remembers his wife, no matter the temptation. A good father hopes his wife instills in his child the values of the Emperor. For the first time in the chapel, Jagg dozed off. He hardly had any access to girls, either before the Call or during it. In fact, he hadn't seen a girl in eight weeks time. The last female he had seen was the unflattering figure of the transport driver when he had first come to the military compound. The talk was directed less at the conscripts and more towards the soldiers amongst the congregation. When the Lector had finished, Callum had to rouse Jagg awake.

On the parade ground they were marched and were issued ident-tags and referred to by their last names. Hauster was in a good mood, having only to slap two soldiers whose stance wasn't up to his expectations. Most others, Jagg included, got a tugg on the ear. Hauster was actually smiling, or at least as much as his mouth allowed.

"The conscripts are now men of Krieg and....oh wait."

He shook his head, "Not quite. The future of Krieg is important as its redemption. No future, no redemption."

"What's he on about?" Callum whispered from behind Jagg. Jagg snapped his foot back, giving his friend a kick to the shins when Hauster wasn't looking.


"The Death Korps does not send its young men off to war, most likely never to return, without ensuring they provide an act of service of paramount importance. Some of you, judging by your sh*t eating grins know where this is going. Those of you who are naive and are sure to be conned out of all your belongings the moment you leave my sight, what a surprise I have for you." Hauster paused, letting anticipation and in Jagg's case confusion build up.


"Time to get married and make a baby!"

Cheers rang out from the platoon and more than a few blank stares. Callum let out a half laugh, "The old basta*rd isn't serious?"

Jagg shook his head, "I don't think so. I don't. I don't know. I thought you just met, well. You know. Do we get to mingle with some girls or something? A party?"

Hauster waved his hand getting the men to silence themselves and his eyes twinkled and he produced a data slate.

Hauster called out, "Conscripts! You are going into action. Some cogitator has matched you up with a fine wife. She is, as of this very moment, at her most fertile. For the next three days according to the adepts! Three days of rigorous duty lie ahead. This very well might be the only time you see your darling wife, and thus you best get her full with child now.  Hauster laughed darkly as he walked before the men.

 Failure to achieve this most basic human act of reproduction will cause the marriage to be nulled, and your sweet woman will be passed off to the next batch of conscripts when she is fertile and ready to see Krieg's future assured.

Now, now, don't tremble. Do not quake. Do not forget this is for your home world! Somewhere your father, if he is not at the God-Emperor's side as

we speak, is laughing his ass off, for you are no longer being deducted from their ration card. They know you are either dead, or in bed," Hauster laughed as he illuminated his charges on procreation.

Jagg's jaw had yet to close and he noticed the platoon was as dumbfounded as it was agitated. Jagg risked a look back to his section. Callum looked as confused as he did; Kellen Raous had a bemused grin on his face. Thompson waved to Jagg with a wolfish smile and it seemed he had known about this day all along. Not that he had bothered to share what he knew prior.

"By section the conscripts will be given a number. Krieg oh so loves its numbers! That number corresponds with a room in that building way over there. Behind the door lies your bride to be. You have three days leave, if you will. The conscripts will remain in the building and hopefully in their rooms. You will then be assigned your duties. Word is that a fleet is on its way here to pick up men. I expect you'll be off world before the week is out. Now then, where to start off?" Hauster paced and tapped merrily at his dataslate.

"Section leader, Jagg. Your worthless, half empty section is in the most need of replacing our planet's losses. Door number one. Off you go. Callum, get that look off your face. Door two. Raous, that's a fine smirk you have. I'm sure she'll love it, fat sow that I know her to be. She bites, so watch out. Door seventy two..."

Jagg swayed on his feet and shook his head. "I'm married?"

"We all are. By the Throne I wonder..." Callum trudged towards the distant gray building.

"What?" Jagg managed as he made his way in the same direction.

"If she is ugly of course!"

V

OFF WORLD

Jagg lounged in the dimly lit interior of a building which bore no name, but only vibrant yellow numbers and letters. (P11)D-9(P2). The place had the feel of a medicae, with white walls, an overly sterile interior and lines of doors on multiple levels. No one greeted Jagg as he entered the building and he had been standing in front of door number one for some time, dipping his head as other conscripts entered to find their "first posting".

How his father met his mother, was something he never knew and his own mother wouldn't discuss. The school marms were reluctant to address the issue of fathers in general. Queries within his own peer group led to hearsay, none of which Jagg put much stock in. Speaking to girls that were his age was also equally out of the question. They went to their own schola and had their own holy duties to perform in the name of Krieg. Even while not under the tutelage of the schola, the girls who lived around Jagg's hab stuck to their own. They almost seemed to resent Jagg from what few conversations he had with them. They might as well have been a different species all together. A species he needed to interact with shortly.

"Hello dear I'm home," Jagg pondered aloud.

"Hello. My name is Jagg. No. Hello. I am Achim Jagg."

He shook his head and tried again, "Hello, I'm Achim. I am your husband."

Jagg paced before the ominous door.

"For the future! Bear my child!"

Jagg rolled his eyes and finally knocked. Not so much knocked, as stroked the door with his knuckles. An awkward few moments passed where he debating knocking again, or reporting back saying no one was home. The door then opened.

She was old. Not old, just older. Jagg swallowed as he looked at a woman who he figured was in her mid twenties. She was tall for a woman, with short dark hair that cupped her ears and framed her oval face. Her skin was pale, but such was the usual in Krieg's underground hives. Her lips were full and currently occupied with a lit lho stick which she plucked out with

slim fingers. Her eyes were not striking. Large, eyes, but a plain hazel in hue. Her gaze ran up and down, as if inspecting Jagg and she let out a wafting pallor of gray smoke with an exhale. Jagg felt a bit self conscious as the woman, clad in gray service overalls and beneath that a black shirt, leaned in the doorway saying not a word.

"Ahhh..." Jagg licked his lips and shuffled in place. He had virtually no experience with the opposite sex. They were distant creatures, seen often enough, but living in their own world. They had their own friends, their own schola, and their own separate destinies than that of men. How man and woman met up, Jagg never thought much on. Dimly he wondered as one got older if they simply "found" a mate on some distant off-world battlefield. Thinking about it made the idea seem more naive by the moment.

"You gonna stammer like that when you see your first xenos?" she said in a voice that was rich and tinged with amusement. She drew on the lho stick and jerked her head.

"Come on in. Soldier boy."

"I'm not a boy," Jagg retorted, to her back that is, for she had already left, leaving the door open.

Jagg followed and closed the door. It was a damn medicae! There was a bed, a bathroom, a few cabinets and everything had a sterile white paint job. There was no romance or passion at all. The whole room screamed clinical. Even the woman, his wife, had a clinical look. She was clad in a uniform of sorts, the gray overalls and black shirt blending in all too well with the color choices of the military compound's personnel.

"No? I'm twenty five, how old are you, sir?" she added with a wry smile and glanced over her shoulder.

She turned and extinguished the lho stick in an ashtray atop a low cabinet before she sat on the bad, leaning back slightly, using her hands to brace herself.

"I'm not a sir. I'm old enough. I mean, not as old as you but-" he saw her eyebrow rise and knew enough about the female sex to realize he hadn't said the right thing.

Jagg stammered, "You aren't old. No. I mean. My name is Jagg. Well it's Achim actually. I am eighteen. I'm from one of the mid levels, my mother-"

She sighed and shook her head, "How about we don't talk about your mother. I've been through this before. Twice if you can imagine. Both times didn't take. So I know the routine. You have no idea what to do, or what is going on. Fine, fine. My name is Klara. As of now, it's Klara Jagg. It stays that way if I get pregnant. Funny huh? Married by some adept and some Ecclesiastic sort working on a logic-engine to match men to women."

She reached into her front pocket and produced a pack of lho sticks. She held it out.

"Need one?"

"I don't smoke. Klara. Well." Well indeed.

Jagg cleared his throat and looked about then let out a long sigh. This was duty then. It wasn't love. It was just an act.

"Right. I'm ready then."

She let out a laugh and shrugged. She put a lho stick in her mouth and fished out a metal lighter.

Igniting the minor contraband she turned her eyes to him and spoke, her voice muffled a touch by the stick, "You make it sound so terrible. Like you have to take a medicae's shot in the ass."

She took a drag and the end of the stick glowed a bright cherry red. A long exhale sent out a cloud of smoke and Klara grinned.

"If I'm too old for your tastes, we can make this easy."

Jagg stood and stared at her, perplexed and unsure. When she called herself too old he shook his head.

"I didn't mean it that way I told you. You aren't old."

"Don't like my hair?"

"What? No you have nice hair."

"I'm just ugly then?"

Jagg threw up his hands and shook his head yet again, "NO! You're very lovely." In a somewhat frightening way, he mentally added.

"They just told us not ten minutes ago we were all married. I'm still taking this all in. I'm not an expert like you."

"Oh, so now I'm a whore is it?"

Irritation flooded Jagg and he shouted, "No!" then noted she was holding a small smile.

He tilted his head and rubbed it, feeling the fine stubble and said quietly, "Are you messing with me?"

"Yeah. Girl has to get her kicks, eh? Listen, Achim. I can call you that right? Mr. Jagg sounds so formal. Anyways, we have a few days together. I am sure you are full of questions, and I'll answer them. Might even be truthful. But you and I, we need to make a baby. Now I could coax you into it and on day three we can have a fine romantic fling. But the first time I did that, it didn't take.

We could just be mechanical. Schedule it. I did that last time, didn't take. So I'm deciding this is my last chance. When you are done here, if I am not a ma to be, then I'm going to be some slag of a woman in the low levels, or sent to a Sisters Sororitas convent. I'd rather do my part for Krieg, so I have a new plan. "

She stood up and sucked on the lho stick and her eyes lit up devilishly.

Women weren't supposed to be like this. She was downright aggressive. Jagg had the sense women were meek motherly creatures. Stern with their children, but somehow always accepting that men, even boys, were to be respected. Even when the schola marms had it out for him, they were still feminine about it. Klara, who he deemed was literally baby-crazy, was breaking all the social conceptions he had of women. If they were to help out the planet, fine. But Jagg was firm that it should be on his terms. He was the man. He was the father. Father. The thought still struck him as strange.

Jagg began, "Klara. I think it's time you listen. I'm not comfortable in this situation. I'm sorry you've had a hard time of it. So whatever plan you have, hold up a bit. I don't know anything about you. Maybe we can start there?" Jagg offered what he assumed was a kind, and hopefully still solid and stern smile.

Klara unhooked a button on her overalls and let the fabric drop. She crossed her arms and slid her black shirt off, and did so while smoking and speaking at the same time.

"Right. Nice. Anyways, my plan is this. First time I tried the slow and gentle route. Second time, I tried the steady and sure. This time Achim, I'm going for volume."

She tossed the garment away and drew deep on the lho stick, sizzling it away. She flicked it against a wall and placed her hands on her hips, standing naked before Jagg. She was tall and pale. She was soft and firm all at once, she was lithe, she was beautiful.

"But I'm not pushy. If you really, really want. We can do it your way," the woman said.

"Hell with that."

"Thought so."

"So while you learn about guns and tanks, and what not. We get to learn about logic engines, manufactorium work, processing, pregnancy, sex, and get to take a battery of tests on subject after subject. Most you men I find to be quite stupid. Sure you know how to break down a pistol, but did you know that the human cell reproduces in a process called mitosis? Or that an astropath message can take weeks to reach its final destination and some cases years? Or that the Terran rat is the most successful species in the galaxy having migrated to every planet colonized by man and then some? Don't even pretend you did.

I'm convinced our planet is in fact run by women. I mean, not many men stay here do they? And the ones we see don't seem to be in a state of what you might call political power. Broken down sorts, or military men. Really, who 'runs' Krieg?" Klara spoke partially to Jagg and Jagg decided partially to no one at all save herself.

She talked and talked, pausing only to light or discard a lho stick. She reclined in bed next to Jagg, staring up at the white sterile walls. She was coated in sweat from their past efforts and Jagg was in a similar state, minus the lho stick. He tried one and couldn't get the hang of it. He ended up coughing up or just holding the smoke in his mouth, which was apparently, "all wrong."

Jagg looked over to Klara. His wife. He didn't love her. He desired her and truly didn't regret their coupling. But he didn't love her. He couldn't, as much as he wished he could. He hardly knew her and to him she was little more than a stranger. She was an alluring stranger, but a stranger none the less. The endless talking Jagg reasoned was almost an effort on her part to get to know him and vice versa as quickly as possible.

Jagg mused, "The Planetary Governor, the Kaiser, rules Krieg. Then the Death Korps. Have you ever seen a woman issue a command to a man? "

Jagg frowned at her lho stick and rubbed his nose, "You know, if you get, if I make you, that is, if... well."

He cleared his throat, "If you are pregnant. I don't think you should indulge in those things. Contraband can't be good for a baby."


She grinned and leaned up, propping her head up with a hand, while drawing a toned leg smoothly over his waist.

"I think I've seen a woman issue a command or two, soldier. Even a Planetary Governor has a wife, or daughters nagging him. As for these..." she drew on the stick and threw it against the wall. Jagg was surprised they hadn't burned the place down already from her other spent sticks.

"I'll give them up if you and I take. I will. Just in case I do, I'm trying to get it out of my system. Smoke em' while you can hmmm? I mean, if I do take, I may never have the peace and quiet or ability to get a hold of a lho stick again. Got to savor it, Achim. Savor it now before it's all gone. Now about orders." She moved closer and her eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Again? It was great it was. I'll admit it, you were my first. So maybe I'm not that experienced, but 'again' so soon? It's just that-"

He felt as if every conversation with his wife, of roughly an hour's time, was ending up a series of vocalized awkward events. At least on his part. Klara seemed to take great delight in Jagg's discomfort.

"Oh boo hoo. You answered the Call and faced all sorts of physical challenges. Scaled this, crawled under that, rolled about in muck, jogged about on the slab. You can handle eight weeks of exhausting training and now your own sweet wife only asks that you fulfill your physical duty to the home world and it s stutter time? Maybe you can lounge about and wait, but I can't. My last shot, Achim. So guess what?"

She straddled him in a swift motion and to Jagg she felt warm and sweaty, strong, though in a feminine way. She was so aggressive it put Jagg on edge, but with that edge came a returning tinge of excitement. She grinned down upon him in a feral manner.

She yelled, "For Krieg!"

Three days of Klara were more intensive than some of Jagg's most grueling training of the past eight weeks. She was relentless, insistent, and because she was older than Jagg she had a habit of treating him as a wide eyed, inexperienced juve. He reconciled with the fact he was all these things, but still didn't take kindly to her reminders.

Three days spent mostly in bed or taking brief strolls around the building had passed quickly. Jagg found himself staring in a mirror, with Klara behind him, nibbling his ear as he attempted to get dressed for the third time. He looked pale, haggard, and overly thin and upon his bald head had a fine layer of black stubble upon it. Sergeant Hauster's training had turned him into wiry corded muscle, and Klara's three days of tutelage had rendered him sleep deprived and spent.

He didn't love her and it bothered him. Three days of close contact had revealed to Jagg that he quite liked the opposite sex and that given time he would love her. She was witty, honest, passionate and driven. But they weren't afforded time. This was the third day, the end of their coupling, and even their marriage if she was not found to be pregnant.

"So this is it. You've been fun, Achim, really wish you didn't have to go. The last two were fun too, but I've a special feeling about you. Listen up though. Check your ration card, and you'll note a few deductions. I'll be one of them. It'll take a few months for your paymaster to get the information from Krieg about further deductions. If you see I'm no longer eating into your ration card, then that's it. It didn't take, or if I'm lucky I got hit by a transport and killed. If it goes up, then have a drink and lho stick, because you're a father." She wrapped her arms about him and looked over his shoulder into the mirror.

"Don't get killed. At least not till you know one way or another. I'd like a widow's pension."

Jagg nodded and reached his hand back to take hers and offer a squeeze. It felt like the right gesture to make.

"You remember where my mother lives? You promise to visit her, to tell her everything. She'll take care of you. And I'll not get killed."

"Says the soldier off to war. Well I hope that you're right. I'll visit your mother, I'll tell her. My promise, ok? We may not see each other again, " she began.

"Again?! Klara, I can't! I have to-"

"No, no. By the Throne the look of panic that just went into your eyes. We may not see each other for a long time. You may never be sent back here. I'm never leaving here. That's Krieg. They never give us enough time. Time to say all the things two people, a married couple, should say to one another. My mother, she never told me a thing about my father. Yours?" she queried with a raised brow.

"Nothing, really. No, but I know he's a soldier. I saw pictures," Jagg frowned sheepishly. Of course he was a soldier. Who wasn't? It was the destiny of a Man of Krieg, to be a soldier of the Imperium and to leave the planet and earn Krieg's redemption in far off places. The men fought, the women stayed.

"If it takes, I'll tell your son or daughter about you. Whatever I can. What little. More than my mother told me and yours told you. I don't want to get emotional on you. I don't want your last memory of me, one with tears and the bawling and all that. So. A kiss. Kiss me now and walk out the door. I'll remember you, Achim Jagg."

She stepped around him, placing herself against the sink, interposing her body between him and the mirror.

Jagg was the one who felt his eyes water. Three days?! It was unfair. It was Krieg, as she had said. He put his hands on her hips and steeled himself to look into her eyes. They were bright and her smile was wide. He kissed her and wondered if love felt like that? A longing and desire to be together. Beyond just the physical he wanted to be with her. He wanted to take her with him or somehow stay behind with her. He wanted to see for himself if she took, if she had his child. But there wasn't time. There was her life and

his and they were to be separated by what might as well have been an endless distance.

Jagg kissed her for a long while, feeling her softness, memorizing her smell, even savoring the after scent of her lho sticks. Then as she wished, there were no tears. Jagg turned and marched out the door, gritting his teeth as he left his wife behind.

Hauster had assembled the conscripts for the final time. They stood on the parade ground of [PUT] Bitch ot Three [PUZ]. They were all men and boys no longer. At least in theory. Jagg didn't feel much a man at all having met, slept with, and left his wife after barely knowing more than her name. Klara. She smells good, even the damn lho. She feels soft. I want to love her, Jagg thought.

"Men of Krieg! No sad eyes. Nor sloppy grins. No time to dwell on the past, no time to think of those left behind, living or dead. For you have work ahead of you. Holy work. This is the last time you will wear those shabby iron gray uniforms, the last time you will see my smiling face, the last time you may set foot on your home world. I have turned you into the instrument of the Golden Throne. Eight weeks of pain have been invested into you and it is time you repay me for it, [CCH] Hauster said.

He puffed his broad chest out, [STS] Hear your assignment and carry out the orders of your superiors as a Man of Krieg. Kill the enemies of the Imperium. Root out heresy before it spreads. Offer no mercy to those who deny Holy Terra. See that a world dies before it turns. See that a man is shot before he doubts. Redeem Krieg. Die with your home world's name on your lips and a smile on your face knowing you have done your duty. And scare the living lights out of those other weakling Guard regiments!"

Hauster strode before the section waving his hand as he addressed his charges. He produced a data slate and looked upon it. Name by name he read off where they were to go, which building to approach and for what purpose.

Some were told they would remain on Krieg, to learn a specialist skill, others were told they would be deployed somewhere within the world itself. Most were told to head to a building within the compound and report in to their regiment.

"Achim Jagg. What fortune is this? Achim Jagg, Edwin Callum, and Kellen Raous. It seems by some miraculous error caused by a lazy scribe no doubt, you have been assigned to the same command. The rest of your section will have a long cry tonight. Over there is a quite massive

building. Beautiful is it not. Home of the 76th Death Korps. A fine regiment recently decimated in holy combat. It is a regiment in need of some fine men." Hauster looked up catching Jagg's eye a moment, then clacked his teeth looking down to the data slate, issuing out the rest of the section's assignments.

He ended with a loud, "Dismissed!"

The Sergeant marched past the ranks of {PU1}Bitch of Three {PU2} and back into the building itself. Jagg never saw him again.

Goodbyes were had. Hands were shook. Lamenting looks were cast back to the structure where the wives were while wry looks were cast to the {PU1}B-03 {PU2}. Then it was over and the Conscript Platoon disbanded. Jagg, Callum and Raous walked together across the compound to one of the super structures. It bore no markings that indicated it belonged to the 76th, only the usual vibrant yellow letter number codes.

Jagg felt trepidation as they neared the gargantuan building. It loomed so high that it appeared as if it were about to topple over. It blocked out the false light of Krieg and guards outside its doors halted them. Ident-tags were checked and they were told to report to the quartermaster.

Inside the structure was a labyrinth of rooms and halls, and the place was many times larger than {PU1}B-01 {PU2}, {PU1}B-02 {PU2} and {PU1}B-03 {PU2} combined. Using directions bolted to the plain gray walls Jagg and the rest found the quartermaster. He quickly had them issued with new uniforms and kit, and had them leave behind everything from their days as conscripts. Jagg knew the next batch of youths receiving the Call would be wearing their iron grays in a matter of days, maybe even hours.

Jagg adjusted his charcoal gray uniform and cap and couldn't help but smile. He was at last a Man of Krieg. The uniform provided the final touch. He was a bit annoyed that despite their completion of training they were assigned ancient bolt-actions and not lasguns, nor was Jagg issued a section leader revolver. Still, the uniforms looked martial and fit well. His mood uplifted Jagg and the newly arrived replacements were sent to an

officer in charge of placing them. The process was smooth and efficient and minus the beatings they had endured as conscripts.

"Ah! Replacements. Just in time, we are off world in a day. Most the regiment is already-" the officer pointed up.

"Jagg, you were section leader? Callum a vox-man and Raous the stop gap? A nice cadre and I have just the place for you. Sergeant Taubover's section is down a few men. I'll assign you to him. You're CO is Leutnant von Zietdel. They'll fill you in on the rest. Welcome to the 76th." The officer was brisk, pleasant and had rapidly assigned and directed the three.

Through the warrens of halls they went, taking a few wrong turns much to the annoyance of anyone they asked directions for. Eventually Jagg entered a room filled with bunks, but only a few people. A quick look and Jagg noted five men. Older men he gathered, with hard and lean looks. They all glared at the new arrivals and one amongst them stood up.

"Uhh, Jagg, Callum and Raous reporting," Jagg said and he noticed the man standing bore the rank of Sergeant. Jagg nodded to the fellow who was tall and thin, and looking closer at him Jagg guessed he was well into his forties.

"Sergeant," Jagg swiftly added.

"Hmm. New boys. Conscripts," one of the soldiers mumbled darkly.

"We are Men of Krieg now! We just got issued our uniform, answered the Call," Callum retorted.

"Did our sacred duty!" Kellen Raous offered with a wide beaming smile.

The older man, Taubover, Jagg assumed, rubbed his jaw and offered a weak smile which did not reach his eyes. They were twin dark coals set upon them.

"Men of Krieg? Hardly. You? A set of ident-tags, a new uniform and a woman squealing between your legs does not make you a man. Not of

Krieg. You are conscripts. For now. Welcome to section four. On our last campaign we lost five people. Those were men. You fill the shoes of men. Men who fought and died. You three boys. You, you, you."

He pointed at the three in turn, "Position four, five and six. You're gun bunnies. Stow your kit, but don't get comfy, children. We're going up in a few hours."

He grinned wolfishly and rubbed back his short cropped dark hair streaked with silver.

Taubover growled, "Up there word is we're on our way to a siege. But no one knows what to expect. Confusion. Discord. Uncertainty. The usual. So sit for awhile, children. Oh! And try not to speak." He returned to a bunk and slid into it bedding down.

Jagg shared a look with Callum and Kellen Raous. "Yes, Sergeant" they said in unison before moving to the far end of the room, away from the five veterans.

"Nice welcome. Conscripts still? These guys have an attitude problem. Well, when we out run and out shoot them, maybe then they'll get wise?" Callum returned a glare from one of the old soldiers and sat heavily on a bunk.

"I wonder?" Raous voiced aloud. When he noticed Jagg and Callum looking at him Kellen Raous shrugged and said, "What's a bunny?"

Jagg expected some explanation, but received none. They sat in near silence in the room, divided into two obvious camps. The new and the old. So much for unit comradery. Jagg attempted some small talk with the five others, but Taubover shot him a look and said, "Go play with the others, kid." Ending any attempt on Jagg's part to bridge the gap between them. They waited, and waited some more. Jagg thought of training, of Hauster, of his mother and of Klara.


"Sergeant Taubover? Oh at ease men. Right, quite. Hello." A short young man with a wispy blonde moustache in charcoal gray, donning a peaked cap and the pins of a lieutenant peered into the room. He offered a wide smile then frowned.

"Oh, yes. What was it I wanted to say?"

Taubover leaned up in his bunk and planted his hands upon his knees.

In his dry voice he offered, "Time for us to mount up, sir?"

"Oh yes, yes! That's it. Take your section and go. Well, you know where. Up. I'll see you on the big boat. Oh my, did some of your men recover?" he seemed to notice Jagg and his comrades for the first time.

"No, sir. We know what to do. It'll be all right sir,  Taubover said then offered a thin smile to the befuddled Lieutenant, who apparently was assured and walked off. The sergeant looked to the room.

"Get your gear. Soon as we are stowed away, I'll see what I can pry from von Zietdel. Children, follow along. Don't get in the way."

"Is our CO insane?" Callum whispered, but apparently Taubover's ears were good because he rounded on them.

"Damn right he is. All of us are, children. With good bloody cause. You want to live? Want to be men? You better go crazy too. Now enough talk. Follow." He quickly gathered his own belongings and marched off.

Jagg and the rest followed meekly and unsure. Through the building they went, to the very roof where men were assembled, organized, processed and sent into heavy duty flyers. Packed solid with men, there was no place to sit and the heavy craft had no windows to gaze out of, only a huge cargo ramp. Jagg jostled and looked about at the men who were now his comrades in arms and felt nothing. No affinity. Perhaps in time?

The flyer made groaning sounds and Jagg could hear the engines rumble as they lifted off. Jagg imagined they were moving through vertical transit chutes, up and up, and eventually into Krieg's nightmare atmosphere and beyond that. Standing and waiting evidently took up most a soldier's life, Jagg decided. He stood and waited till the flyer's doors opened to reveal a shadowy bay. For all he could tell, he was just inside another part of Krieg's underground hive, but he knew that he was not. He was on a ship of the Imperial Navy and he was going off world.

VI

The Siege

The alien watched as more ugly, block shaped, ships fell from the sky in streamers of smoke and slowed themselves. Like giant carrion birds the ships circled in the brilliant blue sky of the world the dirty creatures called Jendra IV in their crude mon-keigh tongue.

The ships spiraled as they emptied out from some unseen craft in orbit, a ship no doubt more ugly than the ones it was birthing like a fat grox. The noisy ships stained the sky with black and landed in the human city's starport. Hefting its sniper weapon, the alien peered through the scope and saw an enhanced image of the mess below.

Thousands upon thousands of the Corpse-God's cult warriors were marching in brutally stiff formations from the landing craft. They wore dark hued clothes, bulky coats and brought with them digging machines, strange squat artillery pieces, massive, but ungainly, tanks, some of which mounted chains and heavy steel wrecking balls. Sooty black vapor rose from their obnoxiously loud vehicles. Thousands of the mon-keigh arrayed themselves, perhaps performing some ceremony where they blindly

offered up their lives, without thought to Jendra IV's rulers. It was typical mon-keigh behavior. It was dirty, barbaric and a bit frightening. Where his kind were so few, the humans sent thousands into the field and could replace every single one of them ten times over, a hundred times if needs be. He had learned this early on in his experiences with the hairy beasts. One did not fight them head on. There were simply too many.

~Through your eyes I see. They are here. So many, you think. Too many?"~

The eldar ranger felt the thoughts of the Fareeer glide through his own. She was not questioning, so much as voicing his concerns. He mentally nodded and moved his head away from the ornate scope of his weapon and crouched low in the swaying grasslands. His cloak changed hues as he moved, disguising him from all but the most alert sentries, which the humans apparently lacked.

~They have brought enough,~ she sent.

The ranger did not understand, but one did not know the thoughts of the Farseer or see what she saw, or know what she knew. It was why she led and he followed. "What shall I do? Watch more, Farseer?"

~Your eyes are sharp. Your skills honed. Let the humans spill forth like insects and come night visit death upon them from afar. Make them scurry. Make them fear. Keep their eyes set fully to the land around them and nowhere else. Bait them. Lure them. Harass them,~ she urged.

"Kill them," the ranger whispered.

~Yes.~

"Well this doesn't look right," Taubover said with a cynical grin. He pointed out across the city's horizon. "No battlements. No trenches. No bunkers. Looks like a city in the middle of a damn giant farm."

"No enemy," said Sheer, the section's ammo bearer.

He was the shortest of them, but stocky and in their training aboard the Imperial ship, Jagg had noticed he turned the usually thankless job of ammo carrier into something of an art form. Jagg had learned very quickly never to question the value of the ammo bearer.

"Too bad, I was kind of spoiling for a fight," Kellen Raous chipped in, but when the five original members of the section shot dagger looks at him he shuffled in place and averted his gaze.

Taubover's section was still split in two. One part was Taubover and his original men. Grieg the vox-man, Lufsen the morose stop-gap medicus, Klyst the heavy stubber operator, and the squat but agile Sheer. The other part of the section was, "the conscripts", "the kids", "the children" and so on. Even in training aboard the Imperial ship Jagg had felt no sense of them acting as a single team. Taubover drilled his men and told the children to hang back, or the children to hunker down and offer covering fire, or for the children to get the hell out of the way.

The sergeant didn't give the children the chance to operate with the team. Jagg had learned little from Taubover, except to stay out of his path.

The rest of the 76th he had at least gleaned information from. The regiment was under the command of Grosee-Kapitän von Gotslieb. Jagg had seen him once during their transit from Krieg to Jendra IV. He had been so far away Jagg was sure he could not have picked him out if he saw him again, except by the markings on his charcoal uniform. The regiment had three battalions, of which Jagg was in the second, under the command of Major Stekman. He also had barely made an appearance and Jagg was dimly aware that the major bore an augment in one eye and sported a white moustache. Beneath Stekman were two kompanies, in which Jagg was in the first. The commander of the first kompanie was Hauptman

Ostriker. He was young, energetic and the one who insisted that they train rigorously aboard the Imperial ship to prevent getting what he called, "the confines", which Jagg assumed was a form of restlessness. Underneath the hauptman were various platoons and Jagg was in the first infantry platoon, commanded by von Zietdel, though Jagg wasn't sure if von Zietdel commanded his own faculties let alone the platoon. Then there were the section leaders. The dour Sergeant Taubover was leader of section four.

The regiment was at a strength of about nine hundred combat soldiers, various Rag-na-rok tanks and Chimeras, a variety of Thud guns, and a Valkyrie flyer reserved for the elite storm troopers. This was about half of what the regiment should have been and Jagg had learned that before he transferred into the 76th it had contained five battalions. Two more than it currently did. The regiment had suffered serious losses in a trench war against orks in a sub-sector Jagg had never heard of. They had returned to Krieg for refit and some command changes. Jagg was "fortunate" enough to be assigned to them hours before they headed off to war. Other "children" had joined the regiment, but none from the B buildings. No familiar faces other than Callum and Raous surrounded Jagg.

On board the Imperial ship Taubover had used his various sources and leverage with the lieutenant to learn that the 76th was on its way to relive an agricultural world under alien siege. Details were few but Taubover and the entire regiment assumed to prepare for what the Death Korps did best. They trained for trench defense, offense and a variety of siege tactics and hostile world scenarios. Rumors rippled that the agricultural world had been bombarded into craters and ruins. Other rumors said the place had been scoured lifeless by xenos.


Still others amongst the regiment were positive they overheard the Kapitän say, "This will be a grind."

Instead, as Jagg followed Taubover across the starport pad he saw a world quite unlike what he expected. The sky was a vibrant blue and clouds of white floated above. The sun shone brightly and felt warm against Jagg's features. The air was strange. It had many organic smells to it and was very much different to the sterile air of Krieg's underground hives which

at the most were scented with promethium, oil, or other man-made stench.

The city had a few large structures, but Jagg was convinced the military compound on Krieg was almost as large and the place had no walls, no trenches, bunkers and as had already been made clear. No enemy. All that Jagg could see outside the city were hills that shone a brilliant gold. He had seen pics of grass before, but had never imagined a world could be coated in it. It was far prettier than Krieg's acidic muddy topside. And damnably warm! Jagg felt overdressed in his storm coat and shifted the backpack he bore and the bolt action slug thrower.

Jagg, Callum, and Kellen Raous had been issued with archaic weaponry. Jagg, not for the first time, wistfully looked at how the other part of the section was armed. Klyst's heavy stubber was glossy and black and sleek looking. The rest all had lasguns of black matt and wore an assortment of secondary weapons including stick-bombs, pistols, and knives. Jagg looked dubiously at his only secondary weapon, a bayonet that had a habit of falling off its lug underneath the barrel of his beat up bolt-action.

"If we are lucky, we've been sent to the wrong planet. Come on, let  form up and impress the locals. No smiles, no waving, children. Look like mean bast*rds. We have a reputation to uphold," he indicated Jagg and the rest.

The section moved off and formed up with its platoon which in turn formed up with the kompanie and so on. The regiment presented itself on the starport deck while heavy flyers groaned and roared about them ferrying in more weapons and men.

More standing. More waiting. Jagg was getting fatigued just waiting about at attention, his kit weighed him down, but he kept still and did his best to follow Taubover's instructions. Not that there were any locals to wave at. He'd seen a few people in faded brown uniforms he assumed were the PDF of Jendra IV, but very well could have been boys brought down from the big boat. The God-Emperor knew that the Imperial ship in high orbit had thousands of crew, whose uniforms, titles and jobs Jagg couldn't keep straight.

More standing. More waiting. All Jagg could see were rows upon rows of charcoal uniformed men and a few trundling Chimeras and boxy Rag-Na-Rok siege tanks. Impressive, if one didn't have to stand amongst it for what felt like forever. The life of the Imperial Guard. Waiting. Standing. Waiting.

Leutnant von Zietdel wandered back through the ranks and called for the sergeants. Jagg couldn't hear much but soon his curiosity was sated. Sergeant Taubover returned to the section and spoke to "his" team.

Jagg, Callum and Kellen Raous just happened to be within ear shot when Taubover said, "This is a new one. Seems that there is a siege going on. What they are calling an unconventional siege. Aliens are surrounding us as we speak, though you can't see em, smell em or anything like that. And they've been wiping out the surrounding farming communities. For no apparent reason, other than giggles. So, all that trench training, the Thud guns, the big bast*rds we brought. Right! All that. No good."

The men groaned and muttered.

Taubover offered his wry smile, "Now, now. We've been assigned barracks. The Kapitän I gathered is pretty pissy and the Planetary Governor is insistent we stay and help him with his alien problem. We are here and the enemy is out there somewhere. Get yourselves set for some sweeps I expect. Right, with me." He turned to lead the men off.

"Sergeant?" Jagg asked and frowned when he noted that Taubover and his men looked annoyed that he had spoken. Jagg couldn't help himself. They might be veterans but he and his men, his friends, had no clue as to what was going on.

Jagg asked, "You said aliens? What kind?"

"Weren't you listening conscript? They're probably everywhere. You can't see them, or smell them and they do things with no discernable purpose. Like slaughter farms, and ignore cities." He began walking again.

"Well, what does that mean?" Jagg looked at Callum who shrugged as did Raous.

Lufesn offered, "Eldar, children. It means Eldar. If you could pick an Imperial Guard force least suited to those tricky bast*rds, it be us. This is going to be like a hammer trying to hit a gnat,"

Jagg and the rest followed along. Kellen Raous leaned in, keeping his voice soft so that only Jagg and Callum could hear,

"What's a gnat?"

They all shrugged.



The regiment hunkered down in and around the star port. Jendra IV's capital, Kynder, lacked the area to fully meet the needs of the 76th. It wasn't a planet expecting war. It was a planet of grass, farms and only one major city that exported foodstuffs off world. Jagg dimly wondered if Jendra IV's farms fed Krieg? Krieg produced only one thing, the tools for war and all else had to be shipped in from faraway places. Was this one of them?

The people of Kynder had been expecting help though they lacked proper facilities to house the Death Korps. Tents were placed around the starport as well as some hastily built flakboard buildings. Garages meant for space faring craft and haulers had been converted to meet the needs of the 76th's machinery, while Jagg heard that the higher ranking officers and their staff were housed in the governor's palace. Jagg assumed the palace was the tallest building in the city and even that wasn't nearly as tall as some of the super structures he had seen back home. Jagg's platoon was bunked in a series of tents right on the star port slab itself. It was noisy and hot and dizzying. Jagg wasn't used to open sky nor natural heat. Even Krieg's sky always had a layer of acidic cloud cover, giving one the sense of a ceiling. Not on Jendra IV. Here the sky was blue and as night set Jagg could see stars for the first time. A few at least, for the light of the city blotted out much. Jagg had never seen night before and stared up at the moon from outside his tent.

Sergeant Taubover and his men huddled around a few glow lamps. They were seated on ammo crates and other supplies, talking quietly amongst themselves. Jagg and his friends sat outside their tents. The tents were small one man affairs that one could barely fit into without their feet sticking out the other end.

"Never seen a place big as this go dark," Jagg said and looked up at the night sky. A twinkling light passed through the night air making the tell tale groaning sound of a heavy hauler. All through the day and into the night flyers from above had landed at the port, then returned up into the sky to link back up with the big boat.

"I have. My whole level went dark once. Main lights must have failed, but the interiors still worked. It was strange, like being in a tomb. We made the most of it though and I remember some old hag screeching out for them to leave the lights off. Can't say I was upset when her wish wasn't fulfilled. Don't like all this dark," Callum mentioned and paced around glancing up at the open sky.

"I kind of like it. Different. Different than when they cycled the lights on the big boat. Different than when  B-03  went to lights out. A real dark. You know?" Kellen Raous smiled in wonder. He looked to Jagg, at ease, where as Callum was unnerved.

Jagg agreed with Callum. Give him Krieg's false light over the open dark. He said as much and the three chatted about how different Jendra IV was to all they had ever known. Different than what the pict's had shown. It was one thing to see grass on a screen, another to see it, smell it and listen to its waist high reeds rustle throughout the night.

"I think I'm going to turn in," Jagg said. Earlier in the day men in brown uniforms had brought a cart by with food and drink. Eagerly they had eaten, but it tasted like mush and slightly medicinal. Taubover had mentioned that the regimental medicae often "spiced" up their food with anti-tox. The meal sat uneasily in Jagg's stomach and lying down seemed the best thing for it. Besides, there was nothing to do but wait.

Jagg slept uneasily and awoke with a start as a hand clamped over his mouth. He reached up swiftly to grip the wrists of his assailant, but whoever it was batted his hand away.

The sergeant's voice then whispered in Jagg's ear, "It's me. Get your weapon ready. Crawl out your tent and go where the others are. No quick movements, no sound."

With that the shadow of the sergeant eased out of Jagg's tent and crawled away.

Adrenaline rushed into Jagg. What was happening? He could hardly see in the tent but the star port's lights offered him some illumination. He picked up his bolt action, slowly fished around for some ammo in his pack which was left on the slab and loaded a stripper clip. Jagg pocketed five more clips in his tunic then crawled as he had been taught. He used his legs to move and kept his hands secured on the slug thrower. As an afterthought he donned his shell-shaped combat helm. Crawling, he made his way out of the tent and saw the section had set up a barricade of crates, fabric, packs and random debris they must have hastily scrounged.

Why hadn't he heard them set it up?

Jagg crawled over and saw everyone but Kellen Raous and the sergeant. The section had their weapons pointed out away from the star port towards the distant hills which appeared as black lumps, faintly lit by Kynder's lights and distant stars.

"Wh-," Jagg began but one of the soldiers made a curt gesture with his hand and Jagg was silent.

He hunkered by a stack of two empty crates and clutched his bolt action with nervous pale hands. He heard noise and behind him saw Taubover crawling towards them as well as Raous. The two rejoined the section and everyone arrayed their weapons to face the hills.

"Snipers, children. They dropped the sentries. You stay still and you don't shoot till I tell you to," Taubover ordered in a quick and slicing whisper.

And so they waited and Jagg felt apprehension. He listened but could only hear the usual sounds of the star port. No alarm had been raised but he could see the shapes of people running about. Jagg couldn't tell what the running shapes were up to. Looking out into the night, Jagg saw an expanse of star port slab, then the hills and nothing else. Darkness. He waited and waited some more. Nervousness gave way to confusion. Had there been a mistake?

A high pitched hiss whispered out from the hills and Jagg saw a brief blur of white streak out from the night and pass into the encampment far to his left. He didn't hear a scream, nor was any fire returned. Had they been shot at? Jagg rubbed his face with his hand and blinked his eyes rapidly, trying to adjust to the foreign world's darkness.

Another hiss echoed from the hills and another after that. Jagg could barely distinguish the white light flashing momentarily and speeding towards the star port. Then another louder hiss resounded and Jagg ducked back as the top of the metal crate he was using for cover made a metallic Ping! sound and rocked back. Jagg threw himself flat and the crate fell onto him, making more noise. Jagg worked the crate off his body and looked at it. It was hard to see the crate, but not the object imbedded in it. A thin pale white disk, or something disk-like. If he removed it he was sure he could place it in the palm of his hand. Curious he reached out, but the sergeant had made his way over to Jagg's side.

Taubover grasped Jagg's wrist and laid flat.

He shook his head no and whispered, "Sharp, conscript. You pluck at that, your fingers will fall off."

Jagg adjusted his metal helm and peered up over their barricade. A hiss reported out from the hills and a blur of white snapped through a bundle of clothes they were hiding behind and hit the slab beyond and shattered into fragments of what looked like bone.

Everyone crouched and the sergeant whispered, "Down. Don't shoot. Stay still."

"They're shooting at us sergeant!" Callum said and he almost looked as if he were about to level his bolt action.

"You can't see them. They can see you. Or are trying too conscript. If you want to stick your fool head up and fire off a round into the night. Be my guest, but your two friends will have the job of cleaning our kit when your brains spatter out," Taubover smiled darkly as he spoke.

Callum crouched low again and abandoned the idea of returning fire. The sergeant smirked.

More waiting, but an uneasy waiting. A few more shots landed upon their position and Jagg trembled as he wondered when one of the razor sharp disks would pass through their barricade and into him. Jagg missed the usual kind of waiting. In ranks, doing nothing. This kind of waiting was too deadly and he felt helpless, unable to move, or shoot back. Who knew waiting could be frightening?

Crawling and scooting from tent to tent came another figure, lanky and fast. He eased over to Jagg's position and Jagg could see he wore charcoal gray and sported a long bolt action with a scope upon it that was by far more modern than the weapon it was mounted too. Jagg could make little else out of the new arrival.

"Out on those hills. I'd say three of them," Taubover said to the man who in turn set himself up. Using the crates as a brace the stranger readied his weapon and turned it slowly left to right.

"Too dark to make out much even with the scope's brights on. I see them though. Fast and smart. No way am I going to be able to get a clear shot on them," The man said. He tucked back under cover and nodded to the sergeant.

"I think we have a plan though. Mind playing bait? Shoot at them a bit? In say, two minutes?"

"Right. Off you go then."

Tauber watched the sniper depart then looked to the section.

"Minimum exposure. We don't want to provide too much entertainment for them. Grieg, Sheer, cover fire when I say. Just be brief. Lufsen, you have your medi-bag? Good. Rest of you, keep down and flat. Children..." he eyed them.

"Don't do anything lest I tell you to."

Jagg frowned, he wasn't a child. None of them were. They had answered the Call; they had been trained and in Jagg's case nearly killed. Now some, know it all, sergeant was going to have them lie down and be shot at. Grasping his bolt action Jagg did as he was ordered and inwardly seethed.

Two minutes passed painfully slow and when sergeant Tauber ordered Grieg and Sheer to act, it made Jagg startle.

The two older soldiers leaned up and fired out a dozen lancing beams of red. The lasguns made sizzling snapping sounds and their shots sailed out into the night sky and peppered the distant hills, lighting up the grassy reeds. From around the star port other soldiers sent out a flurry of lasgun rounds and Jagg could see illuminated by lasfire sections of infantry hunkered behind cover just like he was.

From the hills came nothing at first. There was silence, but not for long. Stabbing white lights hissed in from the hills in reply to the zapping crack of the lasguns. The God-Emperor must have been smiling that night. With so many Death Korps firing the unseen assailants had too many targets to choose from. Jagg's section was spared any return fire. He peered past his cover and tried to make out the enemy, their shape, movement, anything. He saw nothing, even when he was staring right at a point from which a hissing white streak emerged, Jagg saw nothing. A sound then rolled across the star port.

Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud.

"Down! Oh, this good! That's one way of doing it," Taubover called out and Grieg and Sheer hid themselves.

Jagg looked about and saw far out on the slab behind them Thud guns, whose names were well earned. Their four barrels pumped like pistons and fire burst from their muzzles. Jagg could see the shapes of their crews manning and reloading them. There must have been ten or more of the guns, all thudding away and making the slab vibrate under the shockwave of their assault.

The hills exploded. Fiery light flared from the ground in packets of four and sent smoke and hunks of earth and burning grass into the black sky. The heavy thudding mixed with the booms of impact and the darkness was lit up in flashes of fyceline explosions. The enemy, wherever they were, fired a few more shots out towards the distant artillery pieces. Jagg imagined they must have hit the crews, but there were too many guns, too many men and they did not relent.

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

Taubover yelled over the guns, "A lesson, children. When facing snipers who are so damn good that you can't hit them with your own scopies. When your own men's skill is outclassed. Make up for it in volume and effect."

Taubover grinned then looked at the section. "I expect this to go on for the night. So, sleep where you are. Come morning be ready." The sallow faced sergeant offered his wry smile then settled down on the slab with no further advice or wisdom.

"Sleep in this?" shouted Callum and peered back at the hammering Thud guns then out across the hills as artillery rippled across in wide sweeping patterns of fire and thrown up earth.

"Want to go ask them to turn it down?" Kellen Raous laughed and tried to copy the older men of the section who were lying down to sleep.

Jagg groaned in resignation. He could see sense in what was being done and he tried to rest as well. The slab vibrated thanks to the barrage and the sounds of the guns was atrociously loud and continuous. But as he listened there was a consistency to the guns. They made a methodic, booming and it was steady.

Thud, thud, thud, thud...

Jagg fell asleep; sung to his dreams by the guns of the Death Korps.

Morning woke Jagg up, not the Thud guns, nor their cessation of fire. Yawning, Jagg peered over the barricade and saw that the makeshift camp had returned to normal. Men went about their duties; a shower which consisted of a wheeled vehicle and several hoses was dowsing a section off. The local PDF were carting about breakfast.

Looking to the hills Jagg couldn't help but let out a laugh, "God-Emperor."

"Reminds you of home eh? Topside at least. Will you look at that," Kellen Raous said cheerily and the two woke up Callum to see it as well.

As annoyed as Callum had been as of late, the sight of the hills impressed him as much as Jagg and Kellen Raous.

The Thud guns and churned up the hills into pits, craters and mounds of still smoking earth. Of the grass, there was none, only the black ash of where once there had been plant matter. The hills had been even reduced in height if Jagg weren't mistaken and looking out across the landscape the hills stuck out in a sea of golden grass. They were like islands. Black rocky islands. Though Jagg had never seen islands in person, he imagined this is what they looked like if you swapped out water for grass.

"I guess they got them!" Jagg laughed.

Taubover wandered over and interjected, "Maybe. If I were them I would have started disengaging real quick after the steel started to rain. But the job is done. They'll be a bit less likely to try and snipe at us. They'll have to keep moving. A shot here, a shot there. Never in one area too long lest we bombard it. A good deterrent, children." Sergeant Taubover's face had a touch of stubble on it and his gray eyes peered at the youths.

Taubover sniffed and spoke, "Now the fun part. The CO has, in his own way, informed me that we are going to clear the area of the alien presence. We are going to be sweeping out across those hills and seeking to engage and destroy the enemy xenos. Bring weapons, ammo, food and drink. Leave behind the ten-seventies, gloves, storm coats and the like. It will be

a lot of marching, hot, you need to travel light and the eldar won't indulge us by attacking trenches. So forget any entrenching."

"Sergeant? How are we going to find them? Will they come out and fight?" Callum asked and Jagg nodded in agreement.

Given their actions thus far, and the way the other men described the aliens, they didn't seem the type one could seek out, find, then kill.


The older men laughed and Taubover grinned, "They'll find us. We then put up a hell of a fight and hope our higher-ups respond in the right way. The Emperor protects, children, now hurry up."

They did as he said, they abandoned in their tents that which they were told they wouldn't need. They ate the food the PDF offered while preparing their own rations and canteens for a long march. More waiting then. Things never happened fast in the Imperial Guard, Jagg surmised. They readied their weapons, assembled by section and waited some more as officers and sergeants conferred with one another. It was hot and as the sun rose higher in the sky. With the rising sun came a humid wind tinged with the smoke from the night **IPUE**'s escapades. The wind was far too hot to be considered pleasant.

Finally they were ordered to spread out and advance towards what remained of the hills. Section after section split up and Jagg looked behind to see the kompanie **IPUE**'s other infantry platoon spreading out as well. They had created two lines of infantry drawn out unevenly across the slab. No man was to walk too closely to another, just in case high explosive landed amongst them. Better for one man to die than two or three.

Leutnant von Zietdel adjusted his peaked cap and placed himself behind first platoon. Taubover's section was on the far right of the line. With a voxed order received by Grieg, the men of the Death Korps advanced. The slab echoed back the sounds of their boots till they left the star port and Kynder behind. Into waist high grass the men marched and Jagg ran his hand over the golden reeds. They were itchy and fibrous. Insects, which he learned to promptly hate, flew up towards him and buzzed about. Onwards

they moved and as they reached the crest of the hills Jagg could see black ash, a few clumps of burnt grass and torn up earth, courtesy the Thud guns.

Everyone moved with skill through the ruined portion of the landscape, knowing the type of terrain well. Craters were jumped across, circumvented or passed through in quick order. Jagg scanned the area, not expecting the enemy, but perhaps some sign of their former presence. A body? Maybe a discarded weapon? The God-Emperor knew that the Death Korps discarded all manner of items as they passed by. Spent shells, empty ration cans, dropped clothing and more. Of the eldar s passing he saw nothing, not a single sign that they had been there at all. They had been though. He had seen the white light of their weapons. Jagg had heard as they readied to march out that a few men had even been killed by the alien snipers before a quiet alert was sounded. Looking at the lack of evidence though, Jagg was unsure if their Thud guns had killed anything beyond grass.

"I don't even know what an eldar looks like," Jagg mouthed aloud and three steps to his left the heavy stubber operator, Klyst looked over.

Klyst was typical for a Mr. Heavy. His legs were somewhat bowed from the weight of his weapon and his shoulders were wide, so as to support the strap that suspended the heavy stubber. His pale neck was a corded mass of muscle and his face bore a few scars and a missing ear. Jagg knew that position nine was a target, that once a heavy weapon opened up, the enemy was drawn to it, more so than the "gun bunnies".

Klyst's voice was as deep and the brim of his helmet hid his eyes, "Tall. Very colorful. But they got this knack of not being seen till they want to be. They don't move like us. Don't think like us. Keep sharp. When they are ready, they'll hit us."

Jagg didn't like the sound of that. They passed over the blackened hills and were soon walking amongst warm waist high reeds of gold. A sea of it. As far as Jagg could see was an ocean of swaying grass. He wondered if the alien eldar were watching them at that exact moment, waiting for the moment to strike. Whistles and rustles came from the reeds, but no one in the sweeping advance paid the noises any mind. Natural sounds Jagg

supposed. He hefted his ancient bolt-action and moved ahead. The sun moved as well, its golden light passing above them, the rays broken up only by white fluffy clouds. The men marched for a few hours with nothing exciting occurring until a couple of Thunderbolt Navy fighters roared past high above. No enemy yet, no reports in of trouble and no siege to be found. Jagg sighed as he thought of the slow Thud guns, tanks and other specialists they had left behind at Kynder's starport.

Could the big guns ever be put into action against a foe that was so elusive? He had seen it once, but doubted the nimble Eldar would oblige the Men of Krieg again.

They paused to eat rations and sip on water from their canteens. The rations were bland, the water coppersy in taste. Not too much, Taubover had warned, too much food or drink could ruin a long march.

Idle chat was had and sentries posted. For awhile Jagg felt as if this would be a good moment for the eldar to strike, to emerge from nothing and hit them while they rested. But it didn't happen. There was more waiting, then more marching, and then night.

With night, the platoon prepared for any attack by snipers. Sentries were once again posted, meals quickly had, and men slept amongst the grass. It was uncomfortable, for the grass itched and had bugs in it, but Jagg had to admit it was excellent cover. Only the sentries could be seen above the swaying reeds. An outsider looking on would never expect that in the open fields of grass roughly a hundred men slumbered and waited. It was an unusual siege the Death Korps found themselves in.

VII

BY CHANCE

The asteroid passed through a tear in reality. From the warp it spun out and emerged into the reality of the star system. The asteroid was more than just an enormous rock. It was multiple asteroids, fused together with dead ships, random hunks of metal and some unidentifiable bits. It bore pieces of a dozen different cultures and was powered by the engines of a hundred

different ships, all rigged in a different way so that at any one time when the glowing engines of the asteroid ignited, fully a third of them flickered out. As it passed through the void of space debris tumbled from it, leaving behind a wake of rock, metal, and the occasional hapless body.

Deep within the asteroid a massive creature sat upon its throne of bones and looted war prizes. It listened to its Mek-Boy explain why their warp engines had failed. Again. It was a good explanation the creature deemed and so he shot the Mek-Boy in the face rather than have him eaten, or go for a walk outside.

"Wut we'ze got here then? Where is we? I see nuffin? Nuffin worf me time? Eh?" the creature grunted through huge tusked teeth.

It turned its baleful red eyes onto the smaller Mek-Boys. They jabbered and pointed at cracked monitors and brought out a Weird Boy who offered up his own insane explanations as to where they were and why.

From what the creature could figure out, they had been spat out of the warp by the will of Gork and Mork in a system that bore only one planet with life on it and from what their make-shift sensors picked up, it was hardly worth a proper Ork's time. The warlord agreed. Better to cast themselves back into the warp and go elsewhere, find a place more worthy of a warlord of his stature. The boyz would be upset. They hated waiting and the warlord did as well. But a quick fight on a planet with hardly anything on it had too many risks. Unlike smaller orks, the warlord understood risk. In a sense. The risk was that they could be deposited on the planet and promptly stranded there while his many rivals tried to take command of the asteroid. This was more likely to occur if the planet they landed on had nothing worth killing on it. The warlord needed a good fight to keep his horde united.

No, better to wait in the warp and go elsewhere than risk the mob breaking up. The warlord was about to bellow his decree when the Weird Boy cowering before him, got weird.

The Weird Boy's eyes sparkled with blue light and it gripped its head. The massive jaw of the ork worked and the thing's whole head glowed a

brilliant frosty blue. The warlord rose and gripped his power axe. He didn't need a Weird Boy exploding on him, and he'd never seen them glow blue before. Normally it was a nice Orky green.

The warlord was about to smash his axe into the Weird Boy's head, when the psychic Ork stood tall and spoke.

"Humans. There are humans on the planet."

The warlord grunted. The Weird Boy didn't sound quite Orky. But he was Weird, blessed/cursed by the powers of the Ork Gods.



"Whut you mean Weirdy? Hummies? I knowz dat! Tain't worf me time though. A proper Waaagh, needs a good fight!" the warlord growled.

"A regiment of Imperial Guardsmen are down there. I can see them," the Weird Boy intoned in a monotone voice. "Thousands of soldiers. Tanks. More..."


"Eh? How come you didn't say nuffin before? Huh?"

The warlord reached his green hand out and grasped the glowing Weird Boy by its thick throat. Easily he hoisted it up. The warlord shook the Weird Boy and growled in its glittering face.

The Weird Boy didn't react, it just hung there for a moment and answered, "They were laying down in the grass sleeping. They just stood up. I can see them now. I could not see them before, but I see them now. More than just them. Beyond. Thousands of them. A ship in orbit, a city full of them."

The Weird Boy blinked, "Perhaps too many? You are the  big boss . We should go elsewhere. Like you planned."

The warlord's hand clenched and the Weird Boy's throat burst in a spray of ichor.

The blue light went out from the psychic Ork s eyes and the creature holding its crushed throat roared, "Too many? That's what we needed! A

ship! Tanks! Thousands! I sayz we found what we'z been lookin for ladz. Get the boyz ready. We're gonna have a proper WAAAGH!"

Inside the asteroid the orks lifted up their guttural voices in a war cry that was genetically imprinted within them. All thoughts of leaving the system and heading elsewhere were forgotten. Better to fight than wait. Plans to repair the warp engines were dropped and instead the ork Rok veered towards Jendra IV. The warlike aliens readied to invade the world in an orgy of destruction. Nothing unified orks as much as a good fight. As the Rok sped towards the planet the crude sensors confirmed the dead Weird Boy's prophecy.

Humans in their thousands, armed to the teeth, were there just waiting for the orks as if they had been expecting them all along. Fortune had smiled upon the orks, they were about to have a decent fight.

Somewhere hidden on the surface of Jendra IV the Farseer smiled as well.

"Leutnant says were heading back. Quick," Grieg said as he crouched in the golden reeds, an audio box was held in his hand which in turned was wired to the vox on his back. The section had halted as a flurry of new orders had come into the microbead of Grieg's ear.

"Sure he isn't confused? Here give me that Grieg," Sergeant Taubover said then knelt by his vox-man and gripped the audio box, while Grieg had removed the microbead from his own ear and held it up close to the sergeant's helmeted and tilted head.

"Leutnant, this is Sergeant Taubover," a pause came. "I'm fine sir. Yes. Nice weather we are having, agreed. What was that order again?" another pause and Taubover pursed his lips.

"No I'm sure they are sending us back for another reason than that. If we left something behind on Krieg we all wouldn't need to go back and get it."

The section shared dubious looks and Jagg licked his lips nervously. He didn't like the idea that their officer was quite mad. Finally Sergeant Taubover returned the vox equipment to Grieg and stood up. He sighed and gave a half smile, "Back to the star port. Quick. It's a day's march away and we need to be there before sundown. It will be a hard march. No falling behind, children."

The section turned about and up and down the line other sections did the same. Jagg saw the second platoon as dim shapes in the shining grass turn, as their roles were reversed. Over the same ground they had come, they went back again at a brisk pace just as the sun was near its zenith. Jagg wiped sweat from his face and moved at the swift pace the sergeant set. It was a fast pace and Jagg could only talk in short breaths to Raous and Callum who had decided to stay near to him. Rules about staying spread out disintegrated in the interests of making good time.

"I don't," one step, two step, three, "Like this," one step, two step, three, "Must be some trouble. Eldar? Hitting?" Jagg said between breaths as he stomped through the golden reeds and disturbed flying insects.

"Heard Sheer say he saw," one step, two step, three, "Flickers in the night. In the sky," one step, two step, three step, "Lufsen said it was probably the big boat getting slagged."

Kellen Raous joined in, "He would. Pessimist. I say its reinforcements." When the others looked at him with raised brows he laughed and picked up the pace.

Jagg wiped sweat from his face yet again, ducked his head low and concentrated on moving.

They were to be back before the sun set and managed just that. The red light of dusk was kissing the agricultural world just as first platoon's infantry returned from their sweep. Jagg could see the star port lit up, but there was something different.

Men worked all around the city, digging. Men with ten seventies, men with power diggers, men riding in earth movers. The whole regiment was digging in, even though that made no sense at all. What little Jagg had learned about the eldar indicated the last thing they would do would be an attack against prepared Death Korps lines.

"Kapitän sees us, Sarge. Have him personal in my ear. He says we are to take our places in the entrenchments up ahead on the slab. We'll be fed, get an hour's sleep and then we join in the dirt moving," Grieg blinked as he reported the orders flowing into his ear from the master of the regiment itself.

"Understood. Well, this is a bit of mystery. Wonder what the eldar are playing at?" Taubover asked and took in a deep breath just as the final rays of the setting sun vanished so that only the glowing lights of Kynder provided illumination.

"Maybe they brought a titan?" Lufsen said and kicked at the ground, causing the reeds to rustle and a few insects to take to the sky.

"Nice Lufsen, real nice," Klyst replied and he adjusted his heavy stubber, stroking it almost affectionately.

"Yeah. I bet they brought two titans," Kellen Raous added with a broad smile and he even held it as the original members of section four stared at him.

It was Lufsen who broke the silence, "Kid's learning."

"Come on men. I'd prefer to hunker down in a ditch anyways. All the good our stroll has done." Taubover moved off and the rest of section four followed.

Guardsmen had their specialties. Tanith could slip in and out of anywhere. Cadians could stand firm against the worst the Great Enemy could offer. Catachans could handle any jungle. Vallhallans any frozen wasteland. The Death Korps could dig. It wasn't glamorous, but it was what they were good at.

After an hour of rest and bland food Jagg found himself in the dark with a newly issued ten ninety. He had said he had his own, but was informed his tent, and that of the platoon, had been cleared away for entrenchment purposes. He'd be reissued new equipment and if he lost the "borrowed" ten ninety, he'd be charged for it on his ration card, of which Jagg had not received a single one. With the handy shovel Jagg dug into the earth with the rest of the section, clearing away mounds of dirt, which in turn were moved by hand or by machine somewhere else. The earth of Jendra IV was soft enough. Not as soft as Krieg's wasted surface, but more agreeable. When you dug a hole, it stayed a hole and did not fill with green acid.

Talk rippled through the burgeoning trenches about what was going on, but so many rumors flew past Jagg that he discounted them all.

Though he had to admit his favorite was the one that said, "Three eldar titans are inbound!"

It was late when they had finished. They and the other men of the 76th had made trenches big enough to hide in. They weren't deep, just barely at head height and lacked flakboard reinforcements, firing steps, bunkers and the like, but they must have been good enough. All work was told to stop.

No further orders came in and Taubover recommended they sleep and he'd rotate a watch.

This must have been unofficial policy. All down the length of the hastily dug trench, first platoon's men slid down into the confines of the ditch and shuffled in place trying to get comfortable without general orders from above.

Jagg did his best to get comfortable as a few men outside the trench ran razor wire and placed land mines randomly. Jagg could see in the dark, just barely, the black hills they had bombarded the day prior. Amusingly enough Jagg discerned that their section was almost exactly where it had been the night before. For all the marching back and forth, they had advanced in total no more than a hundred yards off of the slab of the starport. The young man sighed deeply and did his best to sleep, too tired to really care anymore why they were doing what they were. It was easier not to worry and just do.

Morning came and Jagg blinked his bleary eyes. He looked about. He had slept in a curled up position and at some point in the night removed his helmet. Down the length of the trench Jagg could see other soldiers yawning and rising. Stiff and hungry Jagg rose and instantly felt a natural urge. Taubover was already awake and peering out over the edge of the trench. Razorwire glittered as the morning rays hit them and Jagg could see mounds of earth where mines had been hastily buried, but not well concealed. A look behind their position revealed a secondary trench right before the starport slab itself. Beyond that were the starport facilities and the city of Kynder. Jagg hadn't the slightest clue as to why they had entrenched, he was however happy to not see any elder titans looming in the distance.

"Sergeant, where's the latrine?" Jagg asked.

"Head that way, you'll see a transit trench, it'll lead to a pit. Hurry up." Taubover rubbed his jaw and added, "Put your helmet on."

Jagg nodded and popped his helmet on his head. He was about to lock on the strap when he remembered something from the Uplifting Primer that mentioned artillery could cause enough force to twist the helmet and turn the strap into a strangle-cord. Jagg let the brown straps dangle by his cheeks as he made his way to the latrine. Better to be safe, just in case Lufsen's titans showed up.

By the time he had returned, Jagg noticed most the line had awoken and were eating rations or drinking from their canteens. No brown-clad PDF today. Jagg saw his own section doing the same as the others and he mingled back amongst them, greeting his friends and nodding to the section's old timers who didn't bother returning the gesture.

"Any news, Sergeant?" Jagg offered but the older man simply shook his head and stared across the land.

Grieg set his cumbersome vox down and dug a little pocket in the earth for it, so people could scurry about the trench and not trip over the thing. Lufsen was messing with his medicae kit - rearranging bandages and

readying anti-tox. Sheer and Klyst were positioning the heavy stubber and arranging ammo for easy access. Jagg was unsure what to do with himself and so picked up his weapon where he had left it by his "bed" and checked it over. Callum and Kellen Raous shrugged and did the same.

More waiting dragged the day on and Jagg felt any sense of apprehension give way to boredom. If something was going to happen, he wanted it to happen now.

[STB] All we do is hurry up and wait, **[ECH]** Jagg mumbled.

To the youth **[PUB]**'s surprise the old men of the section laughed.

Grieg kept close to his vox and when he perked up everyone in the section looked at him expectantly.

The communications expert glanced to Sergeant Taubover and nodded, "Getting general orders from the Kapitän. We are to hold this trench, fall back to the second trench only when ordered to. That's it, Sarge."

"Not very enlightening, but look at that sky. Not so blue is it?" Taubover pointed.

Jagg looked up and noticed for the first time streaks of black mingled amongst the white clouds and azure sky.

Staring hard Jagg could see some of the inky contrails were expanding, as if something were falling from orbit.

"What is it?" Jagg murmured.

"Could be debris from high orbit. Could be the big boat falling to pieces. Could be landers. Not sure yet. They're scattering all over the place though, see there, and there, and there." Taubover kept his eyes skyward before peering out over the trench once more.

"Just have to wait and see. Eh? More waiting, child!"

Jagg inwardly sighed. More waiting. But this time the wait wasn't long. More unnatural clouds polluted the blue skyline and the contrails of darkness were everywhere leading from high above to points on the ground Jagg could not see. The contrails dissipated slowly, forming a general gray pallor in the air that nearly matched the charcoal uniforms of the Death Korps. It did a good job of obscuring the sun. Then came noise.

Engines, small arms fire, and echoed shouts from beyond the blackened hills. Jagg could see beyond the ruined hills black smoke coiling up that only added to the darkening haze in Jendra IV's sky. Were the eldar up to some new form of attack? Was the smoke in the sky not smoke at all? Jagg didn't have his rebreather with him and he looked down the line. No one else in the trench had theirs on. No one seemed to be worried, or scrambling for a mask. But if it was not poison in the air then what?

The roaring and scattering shots from afar picked up in volume and intensity while the morning progressed. Nothing new came in on the vox and soldiers began to talk less and spent most of their time looking at the hills. Sound rumbled from behind the blackened rise and thick acrid smoke rose into the air. Jagg thought he could hear deep chanting but whatever was being bellowed out, was in a language he couldn't interpret.

Louder the sounds grew and the men of first platoon clutched their weapons. A few placed stick-bombs just outside the lip of the trench. Many made the sign of the Aquila and offered up a prayer to the Emperor. It was more waiting, but a nerve wracking variety of waiting. Moments ticked by, grating on Jagg's nerves.

Jagg had previously longed for something, anything, to happen; with the rising roar of engines and the darkness of smoke, Jagg found himself changing his mind. Better that nothing would happen because behind the hill he knew there was something bad, loud, and very dangerous on its way.

The sun was at its height but the normally bright orb was masked in a low hanging vaporous swathe of smoke, both from the contrails that still fell from the sky, and from whatever was amassing behind the hill. The men around Jagg began to tense and crouch. Jagg heard weapons being leveled

and he could see something cresting the top of the hill. Three somethings in fact.

They were much larger than a man, vehicles of some mad design, shaped like a can with stumpy metal legs. The body of the machines were painted in garish red, then slashed with crude white and black marks and crudely drawn symbols. The rusty metal arms were ungainly, and sported buzzing saws and large caliber slug throwers which trailed belts of ammo. The three walking cans stomped atop the hill and from various exhaust ports emitted puffs of sooty black into the air. To Jagg, they were decidedly un-Eldarish.

A bestial roar bellowed from the trio of machines, cast out by an alien vox system that crackled and skipped. The firing then began.

Streams of glowing tracer fire spat haphazardly at the trench. Belted ammunition flowed into the stuttering guns of the machines and coppery shells were ejected into the sky high above. The shells landed like rain about the advancing alien devices, plinking steadily.

"Orks! Blasted Orks. Down!" Taubover called out over the roaring, buzzing, and firing of the metal monstrosities.

The sergeant slid low in the trench, hardly looking over the freshly dug lip. His jaw clenched tight.

Jagg and the rest did the same, making themselves as small as possible. Orks? Jagg knew what orks were but there weren't supposed to be orks here.

The three advancing ork machines walked steadily if a bit ungainly. One even bounced into the other with a squeal of metal on metal. Their firing was random and directed at the entire trench line. Puffs of earth made Jagg duck his head. Soon as it happened the heavy shells stitched across another part of the trench in broad, wild sweeps.

Closer and closer the walking cans came, their cobbled together forms looking somehow much bigger, their jagged saws larger, their churning

guns impossibly huge. Jagg swallowed as he felt fear in his gut.

Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud.

The sound from behind Jagg made him wince a moment then smile. He was starting to like that sound! Explosions ripped out across the hills just as they had the night before. Earth was flung skyward and explosions boomed.

A Thud gun shell directly hit one of the walking cans and tore it asunder. Black, rich smoke billowed from the gaping hole. The machine staggered, fired once and collapsed in a metal heap. Another shell hit a machine's leg, blasting it off. The can balanced almost comically before falling to the side with a crunch.

Amazingly the pilot kept trying to fire, but the gun was wedged between the fallen machine and the earth. It could not lower its trajectory and glowing hot rounds danced high above Jagg's head.

The final walking can picked up speed trying to rush through the thundering barrage. The machine's wobbling engine ripped out sounds as loud as the Thud guns and its gears emitted high pitch squeals.

Jagg licked his drying lips and looked dubiously at his bolt-action. When the monstrous can was fifty yards off someone from within the trench fired a rocket launcher. A white streak of smoke raced from the trench line and struck the remaining can square on. A small hole bored into its center with a hollow sounding clunk. The entire backside of the can blew out in a spray of fire and metal bits and hunks of green shredded meat. Like a drunken man the machine still approached before stepping into a crater. It collapsed in a clatter of metal that sounded like a bunch of cutlery being dropped.

Jagg let out a cheer and smiled over at Callum and Raous, but when he looked to the other men of his section he saw only grim faces. Jagg let his cheer die and looked back over the lip of the trench.

Thud gun explosions continued. All around their position shells fell in a sporadic but continual explosive rain. The "wounded" ork machine was hit a second time shattering most of it into bits of unrecognizable metal. Amazingly the pinned gun still fired and only stopped when yet another shell obliterated the alien vehicle completely.

Smoke filled Jagg's field of vision. He gazed out across the land of craters and razor wire and kept his eyes on the hill. He saw briefly what looked like a red bike, but as soon as he saw it the thing vanished back behind the hill. Eventually the Thud gun barrage slowed to a stop leaving ruinous craters, burning grass, and the remains of three ork machines.

"That it? We win?" Jagg asked aloud, hoping that battle was quick, brutal, but at least swiftly over.

Taubover shook his head and smiled once, "No, conscript. Not hardly. Those were just the overly eager ones. The majority will be on foot and we've got a little bit of time before they get here. Drink, eat, but not too much."

Callum slumped in the trench and took out his canteen taking a swig, "Where are the eldar? Why are the orks here? I don't get it."

He swished the water in his mouth, held it and then swallowed.

Still manning his heavy stubber Klyst glanced down. "Nothing to get. We're at the bottom of things. Stuff happens and we usually aren't told why. We fight. That's all there is to it. If you keep wondering, why this? Or why that? You'll get a headache."

His assistant Sheer smirked, "Or promoted."

Or shot, Kleist returned. The two had a laugh and returned to scanning the hilltops.

Jagg sat on his haunches and ate a few rations and sipped some water. Everything smelled of freshly dug earth, burning organic matter and fyceline. The haze of smoke in the air didn't dissipate and after every sip

of water Jagg still felt as if ash had landed on his tongue. Far away on sJagg heard the distant droning of artillery. He leaned up and risked a glance, but could see not much beyond the second line of trenches behind them or the slab of the starport. Smoke was rising from Kynder though. Had the Orks gotten through elsewhere? Did the eldar show up? A quick look down the line and Jagg saw no one seemed to worry about the sights and sounds. They ate, they chatted, a few produced lho sticks. No one paid the plumes of smoke rising from the city any attention.

Jagg had a sudden flash of Klara in his mind. Of her smiling, smoking, and that look of hope in her eyes that she'd at last get pregnant. He missed her. Silly as it was to miss a girl one had only known for three days.

"Here they come. I can hear them. Listen up, children. Aim for the head. Till you are issued, or more likely, loot, some better weaponry those bolt-actions aren't going to cut it lest you get them in the head. I'd have scrounged something else for you, but at the time we were fighting eldar. Much more frail creatures than orks." The Sergeant tapped his head as he explained.

"Sergeant Hauster said you could shoot them in the head and they'd still come at you. Is that true Sergeant Taubover?" Jagg warily asked and looked at his bolt-action with consternation.

Callum and Raous were looking at their own slug throwers as if they were poison.

"Sometimes. But you hit them anywhere else and you'll only get them mad. More mad. You'll see. Listen for my orders, children, and don't do anything stupid. I'm not risking my men to save you if you make mistakes."

He lowered the brim of his helmet, propped his lasgun along the lip of the trench and tightened his jaw again.

"Good luck, Achim. Just in case you know. Death and all that." Callum offered his hand and Jagg shook it.

Raous meandered over and they did the same. A few jokes were passed between them before they took their positions.

Jagg felt fear, but it was manageable. He imagined the slow-moving orks would be torn asunder by the Thud guns just like their contraptions were. He and his companions would only offer the finishing touch on blunting the ork drive. Then he saw them, lumbering shapes of green clad in armor, hide, and swathed in fabrics of red black and white. He wasn't so confident anymore.

They were big things, even from far away Jagg could tell they were broader and taller than anyone in the platoon. In the whole regiment! They wielded not only slug throwers, but also wooden shields, rusty hatchets, hooks, clubs and an assortment of unidentifiable weaponry. There was no order to their movements, no uniformity to their appearance besides the green skin, large jaws and plodding gait. The horde of orks crested and rounded the hill in a mass of flesh, firepower, and destruction. There was so many!

The barbarian xenos bellowed and Jagg added the sound to his list of "dislikes". The horde of orks ran headlong down the pockmarked hill and towards the trench system. The damn creatures were heedless of taking cover or even zig-zagging.

Jagg saw there were too many to handle but he was confident the Thud guns would do their work. The roaring horde leapt over debris, craters and each other as they spilled ever forward. Jagg waited for the big guns to even the odds. He waited. No Thud guns.

"Where the frick is our artillery?!" Jagg yelled.

"Taking a blasted smoke break I figure! There's too many of them," Callum agreed and took a step back and cast a look towards the secondary trench behind them.

Over the pounding of feet, the yell of orks and the other sounds of battle Taubover called, "We don't have the shells to waste on what we can handle. Back in line, children. Time to earn your ration cards! Fire!"

The command started with Taubover but Jagg could hear it echoed throughout the primary trench. The zapping crack of lasguns sounded out as did the deeper, sharper sounds of bolt-actions. Jagg placed the stock of his weapon tight against his shoulder and held his breath. He could feel the earth vibrating from the force of the charging orks, he could feel his chest shudder as Mr. Heavy opened up in a sound that reminded Jagg of tearing fabric. With a breath held, Jagg aimed at the green lump of a head some three hundred yards off. He placed the tip of his finger against the trigger and as Hauster showed him, squeezed. The weapon's discharge sent a high pitched ringing in Jagg's ear and the weapon kicked back into his shoulder. His target stumbled as it was bypassed by the rest of the screaming orks. Jagg had no idea if he killed it. It didn't matter. There were many more to replace the thing.

Jagg worked the bolt, sent the spent casing out, slammed the new round home and aimed once more. Crack! He worked the bolt. Crack! Again and again. He couldn't tell if he hit or not. On the sixth squeeze of the trigger the weapon clicked dry. Panic seized Jagg a moment before he realized he needed to reload. He ducked back to place a new stripper clip into the slug thrower.

Jagg reloaded with trembling fingers as fast as he was able. He leaned back up and saw that the charging orks were two hundred yards away, their mouths still barking out alien battle-cries.

Las blasts and heavy stubber rounds were crashing into the oks, yet they kept coming. They passed over the bodies of their fallen without slowing a beat.

Jagg fired and as the orks came within one hundred yards he began firing faster. Aiming gave way to just simple; point, shoot, repeat. Jagg cursed as he fired dry again and he ducked back to slide another stripper clip in.

His heart was racing and hot sweat ran down his cheeks. He heard nothing but the sound of weapons fire in his ear. Did the sergeant say they should retreat? Jagg looked down the line and saw men leaning forward, braced against the walls of the trench, firing away.

Klyst was firing his weapon in short bursts, while Sheer kept feeding Mr. Heavy his precious belted ammo. Curls of smoke rose from the stubber's barrel.

Callum was shooting and screaming. Kellen Raous was smiling. Smiling?! Jagg blinked kept low in the trench. Lower still, hiding from his eyes the sight of the maddened greenskins.

"UP! UP!"

A hand grasped him by the arm and Jagg looked to see that it was Taubover. He slammed Jagg back into position without mercy. Jagg instantly recoiled from the sight of orks less than fifty yards away.

The sergeant pressed his hand into the square of Jagg's back shouting out, "Shoot, damn you, or I'll shoot you!"

Blinking, and for a moment struggling, Jagg tried once more to turn so as to run away and leave behind the monsters. He wanted to flee, to just turn and run till his legs would carry him no further.

The sergeant would have none of it. His hand remained pressed against Jagg's back, grasping whenever he tried to move.

Without choice and wanting to do something, anything, Jagg planted the stock of the weapon into his shoulder, took hasty aim and fired. The ork he hit was close enough that details could be discerned.

It was large, with hunched shoulders and a broad green face and red bloodshot eyes. It wore a spiked helm and carted two blazing auto guns that chattered wildly sending slugs out in deadly sprays. The creature stopped as a puff of smoke and blood appeared on its chest. A look of fury came over the alien's features. Its eyes searched. The red gaze looked right at Jagg. Roaring it brought both its twin weapons to bear.

Taubover's hand left Jagg's back and he knew that he could run if he wished. The creature was too close. It was time to fight or die. Jagg chose, if reluctantly, to fight.

Jagg worked the bolt, aimed at the beast's head and fired. The xenos head rocked back. It fell to its knees and was promptly crushed by the heavy boots of dozens of other charging orks. Jagg fired again, trying to aim for their broad skulls. It was hard not to miss. There were too many. Too many!

The landmines were going off, but that only added noise to the whole affair. Ripped ork limbs and hunks of leather clad torso were blasted upwards, but on and on they came. They ran over the minefield without the slightest concern for their own safety. The orks were so close Jagg could smell their fetid sweat and wretched blood.

"Hangradnaten!" someone called.

"DOWN!" came Sergeant Taubover's roar.

The section instinctively ducked, even Kylst abandoned his heavy stubber. Stick bombs sailed into the air, their ungainly forms rotating and moving out of Jagg's sight as he crouched in the trench and curled up. He heard concussive booms and alien roars answer in return.

Taubover pulled forth a stick bomb, rotated the switch at the bottom, spoke a prayer and tossed it over the trench. The grenade boomed once, loud and quick.

Jagg found himself near hyperventilating and it was Taubover who helped him to his feet. The sergeant yelled something but Jagg just stared in confused shock.

"Fix bayonets, children. Chop time!"

Taubover slapped a black blade onto the lug of his own lasgun and turned to face the oncoming horde.

Jagg nodded dumbly and did the same. He dimly noticed Callum and Kellen Raous rapidly trying to affix their blades to the lugs at the bottom of the bolt-actions barrels. The blades looked slim and not all that useful against something the size of an ork. Once affixed Jagg leaned into

position and jerked back in fright. Right next to the lip of the trench was an ork lying face down, its tongue was sticking out over its big bottom lip, its red eyes were dull and thankfully lifeless.

Swallowing, Jagg propped his rifle atop the thing's body and leaned against its face. It would do as cover, despite the smell.

Green barbarians littered the area in front of their trench. Some orks were rising, but dozens of concentrated las rounds threw them back down. For fifty yards the corpses of orks were scattered. At the lip of the trench, torn up clumps of the beasts lay, pooling blood. The first wave had been stopped, and not a moment too soon.

Upon the hill a second wave of orks emerged. There were more of the hulking things than in the first wave. Jagg gritted his teeth as the aliens leapt over their dead and began firing their weapons without any other purpose than to make noise. Insanely, the greenskins repeated the charge their dead kin had just made. The beasts' war cry was unique.

"Shut up!" Jagg screamed back and fired his weapon till it ran dry.

There was no stopping them this time; they were far too many of them to thin down with the trench's firepower. The heavy stubber chattered, the lasguns snapped, the bolt-actions cracked and the orks came rushing on, heedless of the danger and uncaring over their losses.

An ork, whose chest was marked by meaty lasgun wounds, leapt ahead of the horde and bore down directly on Jagg. It fired two shots at him in quick succession with a clumsy pistol. Jagg felt something hit his helmet and send him back against the rear wall of the trench. Dirt tumbled atop him and he raised his weapon up by instinct alone.

The ork couldn't fit into the trench. The entrenchment was built fast and barely fit humans let alone a lumbering green skin. The ork stood at the lip of the trench and leveled its weapon to fire down upon Jagg, snarling away as it did so. While it couldn't fit into the trench, its bullets surely could.

Jagg pulled the trigger of his weapon and the stock slammed back into his chest. He was definitely not using it in a way recommended in the Uplifting Primer. The stock punched into his sternum and made his eyes go wide as all the air was forced out of his lungs.

The ork's throat puffed in blood and smoke but even that didn't stop it. It waivered then started to regain its balance despite what should have been a fatal throat-shot.

Callum was near enough that he was able to turn and stab his bayonet into the ork's leg. Taubover, who had remained near Jagg the entire time, rotated and cut the beast along the side with his own blade, leaving a crimson splash in his wake. That didn't kill it either. With a blasted out throat, a leg wound, and blood slicked body, the beast shook its head and started firing once more.

"For the Emperor!" Jagg howled, his words inspired more out of fear than any holy duty.

He sprung ahead and drove the bolt-action's barrel into the ork's chest sticking the blade in deep. Jagg drew the bolt-action back. He stabbed rapidly twice more yelling each time at the stubborn alien. On the third strike the blade's tip broke. The ork's red eyes rolled in its head and dark blood poured from its many wounds. It fell heavily to its knees and the ork's pistol tumbled from its oversized hand.

Other orks were at the mouth of the trench firing away with abandon. Jagg saw Klyst throw himself back, and with the un-braced heavy stubber in his hands, sweep from side to side. Heavy rounds from the stubber passed through the orks hurling them back.

The ammo bearer, Sheer, wide eyed and screaming, produced a laspistol and snapped off rapid rounds at point blank range.

Jagg was about to assist when the kneeling ork, he had bayoneted thrice already, fell into the trench atop him. It was like a heavy hauler had landed upon Jagg's head.

The hulking ork barely fit in the trench. Just enough to virtually crush Jagg. Its green body crumpled atop him. He felt a heavy knock against his helmet and then nothing as he was buried under alien flesh. Darkness swam over Jagg's vision, he dimly wondered if the ork was dead yet.

Jagg felt his senses returning. The sound of weapons fire was still surrounding him. It was dark. He hurt and couldn't move. The body of the ork rocked. For a moment Jagg thought it was still alive, and amazingly, still fighting. Jagg tried to find a weapon, anything, and failing that he beat at its toughened flesh with his bare hands. It was like hitting solid rock.

"Get out, conscript. Come on. Out!"

Jagg heard Taubover and saw light. He crawled towards his voice uneasily. Shakily, Jagg emerged from under the body of the ork, which looked like it had been stuffed into the trench. Its overly-muscled limbs were contorted and its body bent unnaturally. Jagg reached for his weapon and stood up uneasily. He knew he had been knocked out, but for how long?

Orks were piled up two deep before the trench, some were lying across it like bridges. Orks were retreating in the distance, being felled by continuous fire from the trench line.

"They're running," Jagg said numbly, not feeling a rush of excitement nor any sense of victory. His vision swam and he felt decidedly drained.

"Sort of. Orks run, but they regroup, and come back angrier. Usually with more orks. Or they get bored and go elsewhere. We'll see. Drop the bolt-action, I found you this." The sergeant held up a black-matte lasgun with a blood drenched blade affixed to the barrel.

"From where?" Jagg wearily asked as he set aside the slug thrower and reverently picked up the modern weapon.

Taubover jerked his thumb.

Men of Krieg were dead. Scores of bodies were lying in the trench, their forms curled, or leaning propped up against the trench wall, almost as if calmly sitting. Wounded were being carried off on stretchers down the transit trench, groaning and crying. It smelled of blood and offal. For a moment, Jagg felt as if he were about to be sick.

Jagg clutched the weapon and leaned up back into position. He felt Taubover place a few power clips in his hand and he took them with a nod. Callum and Raous had acquired lasguns as well and they stared out at the field of battle. Their faces were smudged with greasy black.

A few ork bodies moved amongst the clumps and piles of corpses. Jagg swore one ork was still heavily breathing, despite missing its legs and arms. Amongst the mass of green Jagg could see bent silvery razorwire, twisted about the legs and bodies of the beasts. Little good that it did.

Jagg jumped as a lasgun round smacked into a dead ork whose head suddenly tilted up in surprise. It fell back down, dead again.

"You can kill them and sometimes they get up a few minutes or hours later. Too damn stupid to know when they are dead," The stop-gap medic Lufsen sighed as he wrapped a bandage about Sheer's hand.

Lufsen frowned and mumbled, "Once they touch down on a planet they are difficult to remove. Like a disease they spread and lest you kill and burn them all, they come back."

"Honest, though!" Sheer smiled and produced a lho stick from his tunic. The stick was bent, and he needed Lufsen's help to light it given the damage to his hand.

"Honest?"

Jagg removed his helmet and noticed it was dented in two places. The gray paint was scratched and the thing looked as if it were a hundred years old. He slipped it, dents and all, back upon his head.

"No real tricks with orks. They come at you again and again. You win or they win. That's that. No sneaking about really. Not like eldar. I much prefer orks." Sheer explained.

"I'd prefer neither," Callum said. He didn't tear his wide eyes off the expanse of corpses or the smoldering hills beyond.

Jagg agreed. They were raised and trained for war, but the real thing was not glorious. It was violent, chaotic and without apparent purpose. He could hardly remember how the events had played out, and the carnage around him was unbelievable. Mangled corpses, of man and alien beast alike were everywhere and thick black smoke from burnt out wrecks polluted the sky. Worse, if what the veterans said was true, the orks would just come back. Again, and again, and again. There had to be a better way, didn't there?

Jagg had a dozen questions in his mind but didn't ask them aloud. Jagg noticed that men in the trenches preferred to act and do, not think or ponder. Several times he had been advised to not think. Here was orks and so they must die. That was simple enough and all that the Men of Krieg needed to know.

The vox man Grieg, spoke into his audio box and used one hand to drown out the sounds of battle which stil echoed. Though their part of the line was currently quiet, Jagg could hear sounds of war from Kynder. Had the orks surrounded them? Jagg tried to listen in on Grieg's conversation.

"Understood. We're holding. Let me ask." Grieg put the audio box down and glanced at Sergeant Taubover as he spoke, "Leutnant wants to know how long before they hit here again?"

Taubover rubbed the stubble on his jaw and looked down the trench line. He called out to a man from another section that Jagg didn't recognize.

"Hey! Guesstime for the orks?"

The man Taubover addressed looked old and grizzled. The veteran tilted his helmet back and glanced up in thought.

He finally said, "Fifteen minutes at the most. Soon as they mob up."

Taubover nodded to Grieg who reported back to Leutnant von Zietdel. The vox man continued to report and listen while the rest of the section looked to the hills. The man Taubover had asked for advice was right. The orks

were back within fifteen minutes, boiling over the hills in an angry swarm, larger than the prior ones.

The orks came in a disorganized horde, supported by red-rumbling bikes that zipped out ahead of the mob, firing heavy autocannon rounds before they circled back in a spray of ash and exhaust. The brutal war cry of the xenos was raised once more to the smoke stained sky and the green tide washed towards the Men of Krieg.

Jagg heard the order to fire ripple down the trench and he aimed and squeezed the trigger. The kick wasn't as much as a bolt-action and the sound sharp, but not as loud. A single shot snapped out and red lancing light landed amongst the orks. Jagg pulled the trigger again and again and smiled. He liked not having to work a bolt every time. Still, despite the higher rate of fire the effect was much the same. The orks simply refused to die. Cracking and snapping weapons sent out a wall of red burning lances of light and slugs which caused the orks to tumble and fall.

The fallen were in turn were overwhelmed by those behind them, in no way slowing their charge. Even when one of the red bikes was struck by a rocket launcher and exploded in pall of debris and fire, the orks simply leapt through the burning wreck and charged onwards. They were mindless to the fact that parts of their soiled clothing had caught fire. Jagg could find no rational reason for the orks to be so driven and determined in their desire to close with the Death Korps. Were they mad? A race of insane creatures heedless of their own lives?

A new sound drew Jagg's attention upwards. Flying orks. He couldn't believe it and gasped. Orks were sailing through the air with rockets attached to their backs. Putrid smoke emitted from the rocket devices in ragged contrails. The aerial orks arced high into the sky along random trajectories.

One engine clunked, spat out smoke then abruptly turned off. The hapless ork fell, its arms waving like wings. It slammed into the horde beneath it. A plume of white smoke roiled in the air but the running xenos were not slowed in the slightest. A few even laughed and pointed at the remains.

Closer the beasts came with their guns booming and thundering while their voices roared in guttural fury.

"We got the order! Time to get back to the secondary!" Grieg cried out. His eyes were wide and stuck on the orks with rockets strapped to their backs.

All along the line men began to race for the nearest transit trenches. A few men, in a panic, tried to be more direct and just climbed out of the trench and ran on open ground. Soon as they were fully exposed the random gunfire from the orks concentrated and gray clad soldiers collapsed as they were riddled with slugs fired from pounding guns. While the orks' ability to aim was lacking, they made up for it in volume and noise.

"Stay down, out that way, set up where I do. Follow fast," Sergeant Taubover ordered swiftly and made his way down the rapidly collapsing line.

Klyst hefted his heavy stubber and Sheer packed up what ammo he could. The flying orks were starting their crazed descent and it looked as if they were going to land more or less behind the primary trench system.

Rounds skipped across the tops of their hasty fortification and more than a few bouncing shells passed perilously close to Jagg. He followed Callum and the rest of the section to the nearest transit trench. For a retreat, it wasn't nearly fast enough and Jagg was sure the onrushing orks would reach them or that the flying orks would block their flight to the second trench line. Thankfully neither occurred, but it was a close thing.

Jagg jogged down the narrow transit trench and had to squeeze to get through it. Good luck to any ork that tried to use it! He hastily entered the secondary trench. It looked as hastily built and as shallow as the one first platoon had just abandoned, but at least it was filled with men firing at the foe. Jagg followed Callum, easing past other Death Korps soldiers, till he saw Sergeant Taubover signal with his hand that they were to take up positions.

Jagg stuffed himself next to a man he didn't know and Callum. Together they propped their weapons up and saw the main ork horde leaping over the primary trench and the orks with rockets on their backs landing in puffs of dirt and noxious fumes. The creatures fired their clumsy pistols into the transit trench, shredding anyone unfortunate enough not to have already escaped.

Jagg began firing with the rest of the line in an increasing volume of firepower as the survivors of the first trench merged with the men of the second. Red gleaming light lanced out at the brutal aliens.

One of the flying ork's rocket pack was struck with a round. The creature was suddenly hurtled skywards, up and up. When it was a small shape, it exploded, sending down bits of metal and green flesh.

Other orks were brought down by concentrated fire. What Jagg thought was an unstoppable horde waivered as the amount of resistance it faced doubled. The ork charge slowed, skittered, then halted.

With a sigh of thanks to the Emperor, Jagg leaned back in the trench with a blink of disbelief. Orks fell back then broke apart and ran. He leaned back up into position and fired off the rest of his power clip, striking orks in the back as they staggered away. None fell dead lest another man in the trench assisted. Few men could drop an ork with a single shot. It was a team effort.

When it was over, the thrill of being alive faded into just weariness and thirst. Jagg missed his mother and he missed Klara. He wanted to know her more than the three days they had been given. The unfairness of it suddenly stung hard in his heart. He even missed Hauster and Bitch of Three. Jagg turned to the man next to him, curious.

He was dead, a hole in his face. The body was still standing, leaning up against the trench while. Even the weapon was still leveled and at the ready. In death, he still served. Jagg looked away to Callum on his other side and smiled once. Callum was alive.

Callum panted and when he saw Jagg looking at him he laughed nervously. It was the laugh of the nearly mad.

"Beat them back twice. Can't believe it. Twice. Emperor protects. Emperor protects."

"The Emperor protects," Jagg agreed and loaded a fresh power clip.

The weapon even loaded easier than a bolt-action! The old cell popped out with a press of a button and was replaced with just a quick slap of a new one. Jagg vowed never to go back to a bolt-action if he could help it.

Taubover was at the end of the section, the whole of which was squeezed near shoulder to shoulder with the original defenders of the secondary line.

Taubover did a head count then frowned at Jagg, "That man next to you is dead. Get him out of the way so someone can take his place. Children, they'll come again. Be ready. Water up."

Taubover looked at Sheer with his wounded hand, "Can you still shoot?"

"Yes, Sarge! Someone was smart enough to give me two hands," the wounded ammo bearer sung out.

Banter broke out amongst the line and Jagg gently pushed the corpse next to him back till it fell to the ground. He tried to move it further, but the body was heavy. Jagg stared at the dead man and reached a hand out, hesitant at first, but then more sure. He found a few power packs and pocketed them. It felt strange at first to loot the dead, but from what he could tell it was common practice. It was a necessary practice.

Callum must have seen him because he snorted, "Nice. Leave him alone, he's had a bad enough day. To have you groping him just makes it worse."

"Dead men don't need ammo. I think he has a ration card. I've never even seen one of them..." Jagg fished around the man's tunic trying to pull out what felt like a stiff piece of paper.

"Quit it, Jagg. Leave him alone. You have the ammo, you don't need anything else."

"Neither does he."

Jagg almost fetched the item when Callum put a hand on his shoulder and dragged him back. Jagg frowned and felt a flicker of annoyance. Callum was always the one to morally object. Though in the Rad he was the one who urged Jagg to kill or be killed. A good friend but his streak of self righteousness, with a dash of hypocrisy, was getting on Jagg's nerves.

"He's dead. He's better off giving his kit to me. Or you. When I drop dead, I'd expect you'd do the same for me."

"To you, you mean," Callum replied.

"No, for. I'd want you to take it. My water, my food, my ammo, even my bloody underwear if you needed it. There isn't time to mourn out here. It's madness."

Jagg jerked his arm away from Callum and sat down to drink from his canteen. It was nearly empty he discovered as he shook it. He looked over at the body and reached out, working off the corpse's canteen. A defiant stare was sent Callum's way as Jagg drank the dead man's water.

For a fellow raised in some scum of a level, I'd expect this to be a regular thing, Jagg said.

Callum didn't respond, he sipped from his own canteen and leaned back in line. A few other soldiers searched the corpse and moved on, and later someone dragged the body away. Not for any sentimental reasons Jagg knew. It was to keep the trench clear for living men. The dead didn't need space.

The sun was still high in the air, the sky still stained with smoke, and the latest assault still fresh in everyone's memory when Taubover sighed, "Here they come again."

The orks chanted in their brutal tongue as they crested the hill for the third time that day. Unsurprisingly more had gathered than ever before and they were anything but dissuaded by the field of corpses before them. If anything, each defeat only encouraged the orks to bring more forces.

Jagg shook his head at the sight of the eager aliens. Were they truly that stupid? But then he reassessed his own condemnation of the orkish mind. They had lost hundreds, perhaps thousands in the past two frontal attacks, but had succeeded in claiming the first trench. If they claimed the second, the star port would be open to attack. The orks were direct and barbaric, but in a sense they were frightfully efficient. The orks had the numbers to spare and were using them to overwhelm the Death Korps. Jagg doubted Imperial Guardsmen could be convinced to attack prepared defenses time and again without the deadly urgings of a commissar. The orks needed no urgings at all. They came for the third time and Jagg could almost imagine that the orks enjoyed it.

The aliens as one let out their genetically imprinted war cry.

"I hate that sound." Callum grumbled and Jagg could only mentally nod in agreement.

He felt a rising fear, just like before but it was somehow muted, as if his body was running out of adrenaline. Blinking his eyes which stung with dust from the prior battles and heavy smoke in the air, Jagg watched as the aliens began their charge. He ducked once as a stray round from the charging xenos hit the earth in front of him and ricocheted past his face with a screaming whine.

"Fire!" came Taubover's predictable order.

The cracking of lasguns worked up and down the line followed by the sound of tearing fabric as the heavy stubbers began to send burst after burst into the enemy.

Jagg squeezed the trigger and shifted aim, taking deep breaths between shots. The range was long, but there were so many orks that even a missed

shot was bound to hit something. The deep roars intensified and the orks reached the first abandoned trench, jumping over it and amazingly picking up speed despite what must have been a three to four hundred yard run. While humans would tire and slow their pace at the sight of a defended trench, the orks redoubled their efforts to close the range.

The defenders' fire was steady and constant, red light glittered along the line and muzzle flashes sparkled. Pale smoke from heated weapons passed into the air creating a wispy fog of cordite and ozone.

Orks fell, wounded and dead, but behind them more came heedless of anything but closing the gap. They were blasting away with their clumsy weapons and brandishing cleavers and over-sized axes. A mob of orks were unexpectedly flung upwards and Jagg's heart lifted as he thought perhaps the Thud guns had come to the rescue, but no.

An ork clad in red power armor, which was literally bolted onto its body, burst to the forefront of the charge. Its blazing multi barreled slug thrower ripped along the trench line, hurling guardsmen back against the wall. In its other hand the creature brought to bear a power claw that crackled with green arcs of electricity.

Naturally fire focused on it, but the thing's armor kept it safe. Even a rocket that struck the massive ork in the gut bounced off and exploded harmlessly.

The armored ork loped faster and it veered far to the left, smashing aside its own troops in its eagerness to get to the trench. The hulking ork came to a halt right before the secondary trench and swept down with its crackling giant claw. Arms, heads, and bits of flesh sprung into the air, as did streaks of crimson, as the ork's melee power claw began to reap a gruesome harvest.

Wildly the armored ork's power claw fished about after prey. It scooped up a soldier who shrieked as the claw snapped off his arm and let the Guardsmen's body drop at its feet. The ork's armored boot rose and fell, flattening the poor, one-armed, soul while the alien's absurdly large gun

thundered away at point blank range. The heavy rounds kicked up dust and blood in equal amounts. The armored giant bellowed a hearty laugh.

As if drawn to the violence, or perhaps the laughter, the whole ork mob started to flow towards the giant beast. Brutal, but effective. The armored ork had pierced the line by itself and the others were about to exploit its gains, even if they didn't know it.

Jagg found himself firing laterally across the trench, leaning over so as not to hit his own men. With a shout of fear Jagg switched the weapon to full auto, but for all his efforts the orks didn't seem to mind. They began to leap over the trench and flow around their armored leader, who having killed everyone in front of it, began to make its own way over the secondary trench. The beast's head swayed side to side as its blood-red eyes sought new prey.

Callum pulled Jagg back just in time. Orkish rounds peppered the earth where Jagg had been leaning moments before.

The flat-nosed youth looked stricken with terror and screamed, "We got to go!"

Jagg saw the trench breaking apart. The line was falling and soldiers were crawling out of the trench and running headlong for the starport slab. All sense of order was lost.

Orks had already crossed the ditch in several places. They swung axes and clubs at those who tried to flee, breaking their bodies apart in mighty gore-spattered arcs. Orks were everywhere and a glance at the distant hills revealed an endless tide of green skinned aliens.

Callum was right; time to go. Jagg turned and crawled out of the trench away from the orks. Callum slipped as he tried to do the same.

Jagg grabbed Callum by his collar and pulled him to his feet as they both began to sprint. Jagg heard the roars of the aliens behind him, but did not dare look back, not even when he felt something pass by him and smack into the earth. He didn't want to know what it was.

Jagg ran like he was back on Krieg training with Hauster on a bad day. He didn't even consider where exactly he was running. Away was all that mattered. Must get away!

Thud, Thud, Thud.

Far across the starport slab the artillery pieces opened up. It was a beautiful sound.

Jagg ran towards the guns, keeping a hold of Callum. The explosions sounded out behind Jagg and he felt the concussion of air buffet against his back. He still did not turn to see what had happened and just kept running, his feet moving in rapid step, almost in time with the quad barreled artillery pieces.

Thud, Thud, Thud.

Callum was the first to drop and took Jagg down with him in a heap. A quick look revealed Callum was physically exhausted. Jagg panted and laid upon the heated slab a moment more before taking a hesitant look behind him. A curtain of artillery had put craters into the earth and slab and created a torrent of ash and smoke.

Emerging from the smoke Jagg could see men in charcoal uniforms running towards him, some without weapons. All had the same look of terror on their faces. Two men were dragging a third by his coat. One man seemed fine at first as she ran, but dropped in a curled up heap and moved no more. That was the chaos and random nature of war. Then the orks came.

Jagg's eyes boggled as he saw a one-armed ork stride through the smoke, a pistol in its one remaining hand. It fired shots into the two Death Korps soldiers who were trying to drag their companion to safety. The ork jumped into the air with a growl and landed on the wounded man with a bone-splitting crunch. More orks emerged, including the red-armored giant, whose weapon thundered away continuously, gunning down anyone before it, ork or Death Korpsmen.

Jagg tried to drag Callum to his feet.

"Come. Come on. Go. Go!" Jagg urged between breaths.

He pulled but Callum shook his head and fell down again. Jagg risked a quick look and saw that the orks were emerging in force through the Thud gun barrage and spilling out across the slab. Many bore horrendous wounds, though seemed not to care or notice.

"Come on, soldier! Get up! For the Emperor's sake!"

One of the retreating soldiers passed by Jagg then skidded to a halt, he scampered back and grasped Callum by the neck and lifted. With the sudden assistance Jagg was able to get his friend to his feet and the three broke into an uneven run.

Callum's second wind seemed to take hold, for he began to run without assistance after a few steps. The three of them darted towards the firing Thud guns and starport buildings beyond. Jagg could only risk a quick glance at their savior.

He was older; his face coated with dust and black ash, his eyes wide with the same fear Jagg felt. There were no time for words or explanations; they just ran as fast as they could. They ran as the orks pursued with murderous intent.

The Thud guns silenced and a new sound replaced them. Music. It was enough to make Jagg look up and he wondered if it was all in his head. Had the panic of the total route caused him to hear things? But sure enough music was echoing out from the massive converted garages in the distance. Large shapes emerged from the garages and out into Jendra's light.

Tanks. Rag-na-Rok tanks. They were on a wide chassis, had flat treads and a boxy turret mounted with a huge main cannon. They were primarily meant to batter down enemy walls, or clear out occupied buildings with their Demolisher cannons, but Jagg wasn't going to complain about their unorthodox use to stem an ork infantry attack.

There were three tanks in all which rolled slowly from the garage and towards the oncoming orks. The loud, almost lyrical music, blazed out from external voxes they bore. The music actually gave the orks pause. Jagg felt the unknown soldier yank him down. All three men of the Death Korps collapsed on the slab and Jagg felt his jaw hit the pavement. He felt sharp pain and saw a tooth fly out. Blood and spit dribbled from his lip and he clutched his jaw in agony. Three crashing booms thundered causing the pavement itself to vibrate from the concussion. Jagg felt his helmet almost pulled off from the force of the tanks' fury. Their guns were depressed low and Jagg was sure they had almost been killed by their own men. An adage came to mind, "friendly fire isn't."

The explosion caused by the three Demolisher guns firing at once was enormous. It sent the orks, rockcrete, and limbs, scattering in all directions. Jagg saw through his tear-filled eyes the armored ork vanish in an inferno of fire and smoke. The orks around the alien were cast in black before being vaporized. Three miniature mushroom clouds rose up from where the tanks shells had struck, tainting the air.

Debris fell from the sky in the form of bits of slab, earth, and bloody green hunks. An ork's head landed near to Jagg and to his horror it looked right at him before the red eyes shut. In the wake of the devastation three giant craters smoldered ringed by the still burning remains of orks.

The lofty music continued to emit from vox-casters on the tanks and they trundled slowly, but surely, across the slab towards the enemy who still emerged from the smoke shrouding the second trench line.

One tank passed right by Jagg. It was painted dark gray and bore various letters and numbers on it. Other odd bits and pieces had been added to the Rag-na-Rok tank as an afterthought. Shovels, wires, spare treads, a few packs upon which canteens and helmets dangled. Standing in the cupola was the tank commander. He wore a pitch-black uniform and donned a dusty, if white, cap. He smiled down at Jagg and waved.

"Sorry we're a bit late. I wanted to set the right mood music first! You like it foot-slogger?"

Jagg's fear drenched mind could come up with no reply, nor could Callum who was back to panting.

The unknown soldier, lying down next to Jagg was witty enough to give a rude gesture with his hand.

Love it tread-head. Have fun and burn up.

He coughed out to Jagg, "Find your units fast. Commissars are drawn to breaks in the line, and they bring with them summary executions."

He strode off. Jagg never found out his name. It would not be the last time either that a nameless member of the Death Korps saved his life.

Taking his advice Jagg and Callum rose and watched as the three siege tanks sent the orks scurrying back in an avalanche of steel, explosions, and music. Jagg removed his helmet and felt the air cool his head; he slung his lasgun over his shoulder. Exhausted, he and Callum looked about at the survivors of First Platoon as they were reorganizing a few paces in front of the now silent Thud guns. Jagg placed his helmet back upon his head and made his way over the slowly assembling men.

Sergeants were waving their hands and calling out to their men, Jagg could see Lieutenant von Zietdel pacing, rubbing his head, and toying with his thin blonde moustache.

He was followed by a few nervous assistants and kept saying things like, "Oh, dear".

"Children! Look at that you're alive. Get over here on the double!" Taubover ordered from the mess of soldiers.

Jagg and Callum made a half hearted jog over and looked at their section. Everyone except the sergeant were seated on the slab catching their breath. Everyone was coated in dirt and ash, Klyst was tending to his heavy stubber and Sheer was knelt beside him, working off the top plate of the weapon. Lufsen was bandaging up Kellen Raous' arm. Raous smiled up at Jagg and Callum and waved with his good arm. Grieg, was as usual, knelt

by his vox, holding one hand over his ear as he listened intently to the audio box in the other.

Taubover snorted. "All alive. The Emperor protects eh? Usually in a retreat like that is when you lose people. Looks like First Platoon is in pretty bad shape, but could have been far worse. The tanks will keep the orks at bay a little while, but those green bleep like a good fight. Soon as they know we have some armor in the vicinity, they'll send something to match it. Or if we get lucky, get distracted and just let this part of the war be over for now. Drink up. If you see a commissar, you stand up, and if asked anything indicate you are eager to attack! Play dumb otherwise." Taubover spit and reached to his side to take up his canteen.

Jagg reached for his, then cursed. The thing had been burst open by a stray round. Tossing it aside he looked around, wondering if anyone wouldn't be needing theirs. No corpses. He sighed inwardly.

"Here. We'll split what is left over." Callum sat by Jagg and handed over his remaining water.

"No, you drink it."

"I'd rather you drink with me," Callum said and smiled wanly.


Callum sniffed, "I was out of breath and you kept me going. You and whoever that was. The least I can do is offer you some water."

Jagg pondered a minute; he then took the canteen to his parched lips. Jagg took a single gulp and held it in his mouth so that he could properly absorb the water and then swallowed. Where his tooth had been knocked out burned. Still, he was thirsty, he had to admit. A smile came to Jagg's lips, "I'd like to think your life was worth a bit more than a sip of water. Have anything else?"

"Serious? Achim you-you're kidding?"

"I am." Jagg tossed the canteen back and Callum rolled his eyes and finished it off. The two then glanced at Raous.

Kellen Raous winced a bit as Lufsen worked on the bandage, but he still held a small smile through the ordeal.

"Lufsen here says it s a lasround. Can you believe it, one of our own accidentally shot me. We've a knack for that. Remember training in the Rad?"

Jagg felt his jaw drop and for a moment wondered if Raous knew. Then he remembered. No. Raous had seen Callum and Jagg "killed" by Keyser but had not seen nor been told of the incident afterwards with Bunderson and his henchmen. Jagg turned his expression into an uneasy smile and shrugged.

"We must be popular. You'll be all right though?"

It was the stop-gap who spoke up, "Perhaps. But his arm may need removing."



"Oh, don't listen too closely to him, conscripts. Lufsen here always assumes the worst." Sheer held up his bandaged hand, "He told me I might lose all my fingers."

"You might."

Section four talked quietly amongst themselves then rose when Leutnant von Zietdel arrived. They saluted and the befuddled man nodded.

"Oh, hello. You all look so dirty and alike. Sergeant, are you dead or alive?"

"Alive. Here, sir." Taubover stepped forward and leaned in to better hear the Leutnant.

"Oh, there you are! I expect hot showers and food for your men soon enough. Seems First Platoon is a bit disordered don't you know?" von Zietdel commented airily as if the near destruction of his command was no more important than the time of day.  Fine weather we are having at least. 

"Any orders, sir?"

"Hmmm? Right to the point you are, Sergeant Taubover. The eldar have apparently vanished you see. Or rather you don't. And they have been replaced with well," he looked over his shoulder across the crater marked slab and the ork strewn field beyond. "Anyways, Hauptman Ostriker says we need to hold this portion of Kynder. I'm planning on reclaiming our trenches since the orks have left for the moment. Rather not fight them on the open. Need to dig in you know."

"Any other information you can share, sir? How many orks? How long do we have to hold? Any reinforcements?" Taubover gently asked.

The confused Leutnant von Zietdel removed his visored cap and stared up at the smoky sky. The sun was sinking towards the horizon and there was only a few hours of light left.

"From what I've learned, Sergeant, the orks chased the big boat to the far side of the planet. Brought one of their giant floating asteroids it seems. So, we'll have to hold here till reinforcements can arrive from outside the system."

"That will take weeks, sir," Taubover stated calmly.

"Hmm quite right there, Sergeant. Suppose we'll have to kill them all then. I'm sure Grosse-Kapitän von Gotslieb has a plan. Did I ever tell you he is my father's cousin?"

"I think so, sir. To the trenches then?"

"Yes, Sergeant! In about ten minutes. And. Oh, dear."

Von Zietdel looked up and placed his hand over his visor to blot out the sun. In the sky red winged machines could be seen flying about in erratic circles.

"Oh I hate when we lose air superiority. Well let's just retake the trenches for now. Wouldn't want to get strafed would we?"

"No, sir, we wouldn't want that."

Taubover ordered his section back on their feet and von Zietdel passed on his orders in person to the other sergeants. First Platoon trudged back across the ground they had just lost, over craters, over parts of ork and man, over bodies of friend and foe then back into the trenches. Bodies of men were unceremoniously dumped outside the trenches, the larger bodies of orks were hacked up before being discarded since they were simply too big to move aside in one piece.

Jagg felt eerie as he stepped over the same land they had occupied earlier and saw the primary's trench floor littered with shell casings, blood soaked bandages and abandoned equipment. One part of the trench looked the same as the rest, but Jagg swore that when he took his position and leaned up against the dirt wall, that he was in the same exact place. Was this typical? He'd done this twice today. The words futile and senseless came to Jagg's mind. His eyes panned up to the blackened hills that were dotted with green corpses and waited. This time he hoped the wait would last forever.

VIII

Down the Throat of the Beast

The Rag-na-Rok tanks returned from their effective, if slow paced, chase. They had crossed over the trench system without difficulty chasing the orks beyond the hill. With the ork push deflected, they returned and positioned themselves behind the secondary trench. They were slow tanks, not meant for rapid movement and so their commanders tried to guide them into dips in the ground seeking out some sense of cover, no matter how limited. The tanks settled in to play the role of stationary fortresses and Jagg was comforted by their presence. Music still rose gently from their vox-casters.

Their engines started up, almost as soon as they had emplaced themselves. The tanks moved in reverse, farther away from them and closer to the large starport buildings. Jagg cursed his luck.

Klyst was busy setting up his heavy stubber with Sheer's help. They were ensuring that when Klyst let the weapon rip, Mr. Heavy wouldn't be exposed. The bull-necked gunner glanced back to the retreating armor and shrugged. He pointed skywards.

"Ork flyers. So long as they keep getting closer and closer, those tanks will keep going back and back. Problem with tanks is, you got no armor up top. Tanks and flyers don't mix."

Jagg sighed deeply and asked, "Well what if those ork flyers come for us? I imagine infantry and flyers don't make a good couple either." Jagg looked up at the ork aircraft which roamed about wildly.

"So long as we are hunkered down, even in something as simple as this trench, they'll not be that effective. Orks ain't all that accurate. It's when you're in the open that you have to worry about those things."

The heavy stubber operator made a few final checks of his weapon then hoisted belts of ammunition out from the cans, helping the wounded ammo bearer Sheer as needed.

Taubover looked over his section and said, "Well, given we have to hold till the Emperor takes a big leap off his throne, conserve your ammo. No shots till they are at two hundred yards. Keep bayonets fixed. Gather up water, ammo, power cells, and rations from the dead. Looks like there isn't much left to scrounge though." The Sergeant glanced to his vox man. "Grieg, have anything new?"

The vox man tilted his head and spoke into the hand held audio box. He then shook his head negative.

"Right. Hold them. Same as before, if it gets rough we fall back to the secondary trench. Once there, we better not fall back. We may not get any arty or armor this time around." Taubover slid himself forward, propped up his lasgun and soon the rest of the section did the same.

Jagg looked about for a fallen Man of Krieg but saw none, just heaps of dead orks whose bodies had formed a secondary layer of protection,

improving the defense value of the trench. They were like biological sandbags. Jagg noticed a few men sliding their weapons through the mass of bodies, and peeking through bent arms and legs, making their profiles near invisible. Jagg did the same placing his lasgun between an ork's arm and body. He peered just to the side of its foul-smelling green corpse so as to be able to see the hills and the tortured landscape around it. There was no swaying golden grass left, just ash, craters and the dead.

The sun was orange and fiery as it set, the smoke made it change into a color that became the same shade of red as blood the further it set. While the day ended Jagg looked apprehensively at the ork flyers, but they seemed to be lost, confused, or perhaps just piloted by orks who really didn't know what they were doing. When they buzzed off, for no discernable reason, Jagg whispered his thanks to Holy Terra. The Rag-na-Roks returned but this time kept their music switched off. Jagg was not as soothed by the fair-weather friends at his rear.

Dusk came and a few orks crested the hill. They wandered about in small groups. The aliens fired a few ill-placed shots but the Men of Krieg did not return fire. The orks were too few and too far away to bother with. The aliens jeered but did not advance closer and soon wandered back behind the hill, patting one another on the back. The area grew quiet. No further orks arrived, as if the aliens had become bored.

Jagg whispered out loud, "The tanks will draw in big orks right? Where are they? I just see small mobs."

"Usually doesn't mean always, conscript. Our tanks are like a beacon, but the orks may be busy elsewhere. Looks like the tread-heads are keeping a low profile as well. Give thanks to the Emperor for now," said Taubover.

Taubover glanced at Jagg, {STS} "Lest you want to see some big un{PUB}s?" {CCH}

{STS} "No, Sergeant!" {CCH}

The sounds of war in the distance continued as the sun became a sliver of red. The small arms fire of the orks was near constant as was the grumblings of engines from their war machines, but the hills First Platoon gazed upon remained still and silent.

The sun vanished behind the horizon and a deep night set upon Jendra IV. The starport's lights did not switch on but Jagg could make out fires silhouetting the buildings of Kynder. Without the light pollution Jagg could see stars and something else. A large blur in the night sky. Whatever it was, it must have been huge to be seen from Jendra IV's surface. Was that the ork ship which had delivered the monsters to rampage and ravage?

Greig cleared his throat and said to Taubover, "Leutnant von Zietdel, sir. He's been told by the Hauptman we are to advance with maximum stealth. First Platoon is to head around the hills and towards an ork encampment. From there hold position till the glory boys are dropped in, then assist. Target is an ork war boss," Grieg said looking up from his vox to Taubover.

Section four's sergeant rubbed his jaw and looked out across the line. Other sections were already beginning to prepare for a stealth march, shedding everything but weapons and ammo.

Tauber nodded and said, "Right, you know what to do. Wait, you three don't. Listen up. We aren't going to get any sleep tonight. Mission is pretty simple. For some reason the orks have gotten soft here. I don't care why. We sneak towards their encampment, somewhere on the other side of those hills, deploy and wait for our storm troopers.

"When the shooting starts aim for the biggest ork you can see and listen for the fallback order. Take weapons and ammo only. Anything else might cause noise. Drink up if you've got it, eat, crap, piss. Now."

The entire line came alive and Jagg shed everything he had, save the lasgun and the power cells it needed. He needed to relieve himself and noticed he wasn't alone. There was no time for latrine lines and so soldiers simply squatted and went, right in the trench. Jagg felt embarrassed but joined them anyways.

Kellen Raous giggled as he squatted as well, "Hope we don't have to reoccupy these trenches."

Within a few minutes Jagg and the rest clambered out of the trench and began walking slowly towards the hills. By the time they were ready there was little light beyond that of the stars and Jagg could hardly see a few paces in front of himself. He was tired and unconsciously bunched up with Callum and Kellen Raous. He didn't want to be alone in the dark, and they seemed to share his sentiment. The platoon moved slowly and supposedly quietly. To Jagg's ears they were as loud as a heavy hauler in a tight transit tube back on Krieg. Jagg distinctly heard their boots stomping on the ground, whispered curses as people tripped over ork bodies or stumbled into shell craters. For all their efforts Jagg didn't feel all that stealthy. He felt afraid, hungry and thirsty, which he was starting to notice was how Imperial Guardsmen felt when they weren't standing about waiting. His missing tooth was starting to bother him in earnest as well.

The platoon went to the far right of the hills and Jagg was curious if they had to fall back who would be there to greet them? Surely some other part of the First Battalion was guarding the star port. Surely the trenches they left empty wouldn't remain so? Jagg pondered how the rest of the 76th regiment had fared.

Had they ringed the city and been struck from multiple sides? Kynder was under siege but it must be holding. Jagg felt the many unknowns of war, grating. He wished desperately he could switch his mind off and focus on nothing but the mission at hand. Despite all his efforts, a hundred what ifs entered his mind.

Quietly, Jagg moved ahead. When he felt a hand touch to his shoulder the young man instantly jumped and gripped his weapon tightly.

"Quiet, conscript. Noise discipline. Maximum stealth remember? Spread out from your two buddies here. Step on a land mine, or have a grenade tossed your way, you're all dead. Don't want that, children. Keep moving," Taubover said, but Jagg could only recognize him by his voice.

Night fighting was something they never trained for on Krieg, for Krieg had no true night. Reluctantly, Jagg separated from Callum and Kellen Raous and moved ahead. He felt alone and could only hear the occasional foot step, whisper, or snuffle. Jagg felt like leveling his lasgun more than once but resisted the urge. It wouldn't be all that stealthy if he snapped a few rounds into one of his own comrades or at thin air thinking it an ork.

Jagg lost all sense of time and concentrated on moving ahead slowly and as quietly as he could. They must have been getting closer to their objective Jagg surmised because the First Platoon had grown quieter and quieter as the night progressed. Jagg's own hearing was then filled with the sounds of reeds against his body. They must have left the burnt out fields and returned to something untouched by flame. Insects buzzed about Jagg and he swatted them away from his dirty, sweaty face. He reached for his canteen and remembered he had none.

Jagg halted and was going to ask a nearby soldier if he could have a sip of water. It was a bit shameful but his throat was parched and he didn't want to drop dead from dehydration. Maybe Lufsen carried some water in his medi-bag? Jagg halted and waited. No sound came to his ears. Noise discipline indeed.

"Hello?" Jagg whispered quickly. No reply came. Swiftly he looked about but the darkness was too supreme, the light of the stars not enough for his eyes to see a thing.

"Oh, damn. Anyone?" Jagg whispered a bit louder. Panic hit him but he laughed nervously regardless.

"I've wandered off," Jagg said to himself.

That was why reeds of grass were brushing his body. The orks had never come this way!

The youth looked up but the stars made no sense to him, and in the pitch black he could make out no landmarks. He couldn't even see the hills behind him. That is if they were behind him. He very well could have ended up veering off and the hills were to his right, or left, or even front! Jagg was unsure what to do. He didn't have a microbead issued to him. Only Grieg and the sergeant had that luxury. An edge of panic came to him. He didn't like being alone.

Jagg didn't want to signal in anyway too dramatic, for it would not only ruin the platoon's stealth mission, it was also sure to draw orks. Jagg sat

in the reeds and removed his helmet. Nervously he ran his hand through his stubbly hair over and over.

"Sh*t," was all he could come up with.

Jagg waited and tried to remember if the Uplifting Primer had anything to say about getting lost besides, "don't". Nothing came to mind. Nothing at all. Jagg rose slowly and started walking. Very cautiously, with steps as silent as he could make them.

He whispered to himself a vague, ill thought out plan, "I'll march till I hear them. If I don't, then come sunrise I'll find the hills and run back. Don't panic. Don't worry."

Jagg heard a sound and did both. He crouched low on his haunches and hastily donned his shell-shaped helmet out of reflex. Whatever sound he thought he heard, it didn't happen again. He listened. Insects hummed, and the wind rustled Jendra's reeds. With great care and caution Jagg resumed his aimless, solo march.

Frightened as he was, Jagg hadn't the slightest as to how much time had passed when at last he heard sounds. A low humming noise that was too smooth to be of ork make. It almost sounded like a Munitorium issued generator. Jagg nearly jogged over to the source of the sound, but a little common sense struck him suddenly and he went prone.

Slowly, Jagg pushed himself through the reeds, trying to only move when the wind was blowing, so that the sounds of his crawling would be drowned out by the swaying dance of grass. The pace was slow and Jagg felt hope and terror all at once.

A soft blue light shone through the reeds. He crawled forth and parted the golden straws of grass to see neither the orks nor Death Korpsmen as he expected.

There was a small clearing in the reeds, and dominating it was a pale, white half-arch. It looked like an ornate "r" shape. Gems glittered on the white silvery surface and the archway glowed with a pale blue light that

reminded Jagg of the color of Jendra IV's daytime sky. The object was beautiful and yet wholly wrong. It did not belong on Jendra IV, it didn't belong anywhere. Its lines were too smooth and natural, yet the thing had clearly been made.

Before the archway stood several tall figures coated in pale white armor, whose fully enclosed helms were cone shaped and painted a contrasting vibrant green. They carried narrow weapons which were the same hue as the archway and were speaking to one another in soft voices that sounded beautiful and neither male nor female. The alien creatures made a few gestures to one another in a non-verbal display that made little sense to Jagg.

Into the archway they stepped one by one. As each entered the arch it looked as if a pool of water had been disturbed by a cast stone. Blue light rippled and the figures began to vanish; passing into the archway and beyond. From Jendra IV to somewhere else they were travelling and Jagg could only imagine as to where. The entire scene was unnerving and unnatural.

Feeling his heart start to race the young Man of Krieg was unsure what to do. There was a total 'wrongness' about the aliens. They had to be eldar! They were humanoid, but too thin to be mistaken for men. Even in their insectoid shaped armor the beings moved with a fluid grace that was unmatched.

Jagg knew they were aliens and had to die. They were the original enemy on Jendra IV. It was every human's duty to eradicate the xenos threat, wherever it was found. Jagg knew he should have charged into the clearing and blazed away with his lasgun in the name of mankind, with the Emperor's praises on his lips. He couldn't move. His nerve failed him.

Bravery did not come to Jagg until there was one alien left. One he could handle. One he could take on. Still, Jagg waited for the optimal moment. He didn't rise till the alien turned its back to him, to step into the unnatural gateway.

"For Terra!" Jagg screamed and bolted out of the reeds raising his weapon to his shoulder in a quick motion.

He pulled the trigger and expected spears of light to snap out from the muzzle. An unsatisfying click sounded instead.

Jagg had no time to wonder why his weapon had failed him. Why now, of all times, the Machine Spirit became angry.

The alien whirled faster than Jagg thought possible and by then they were nose to nose. Jagg continued his charge in a manner that he was sure would make even an ork proud.

Jagg rammed the alien full force and drew his knee up into what he hoped was its crotch. His knee hurt as it hit ceramic armor, but the force of his charge sent the creature stumbling back and onto the ground before the archway. Blue light from the alien portal bathed them both.

Jagg leapt upon the eldar and straddled it with a panicked and feral scream. He slammed the butt of his rifle down into the creature's helmet and sent its head twisting sharply to the side.

Dazed, the being feebly reached up with long and slender fingers to try and grasp Jagg's lasgun. The creature's own weapon lay in the grass, knocked out of its hands by the force of Jagg's charge.

As the thing grasped his lasgun Jagg responded by cracking it again in the helmet. It was fast. He was strong. The hands fell back, limp. The alien was hardly moving but just to be sure Jagg raised up his lasgun, ready to give a final bash that would shatter the thing's skull. Jagg hesitated however, and lowered his weapon.

The xenos creature breathed rapid, pained, breaths, and each inhale and exhale could be heard through its cracked helmet. It tried to move out from under Jagg but went slack. It lacked the strength to squirm away from the human atop it.

Swallowing, Jagg raised his lasgun up once more, to end the fight and finish the eldar, to kill it. It was his divine duty. It was what he had trained for. It was why he and the Men of Krieg were here. To kill. Jagg hesitated.

They were alone, just him and the alien within the glowing gate's pale light.

"What are you?"

The alien didn't respond and its head lolled to the side. Jagg was confident that even as weary as he was, he was physically much stronger than the eldar. Either they were a weak race, vid-films told him so. Or more likely Jagg thought, two cracks to its skull knocked the fight, as well as sense, out of it.

Curiosity struck him and Jagg placed his lasgun to the side and pinned the creature's arms beneath his spread knees. He used his own hands to fumble about the alien's neck, and after fidgeting a moment the helmet hissed. Jagg pulled and prepared himself to stare at the face of the enemy. If it could not tell him what it was. He would see for himself.

It was beautiful. It wasn't an it either, it was a she. She had angular features, bright and large blue eyes that looked like dancing liquid. Her lips were red and full. She had hair, laced up intricately atop her head, the same hue as the grassy reeds of Jendra IV. Bright crimson blood flecked her lips and pale cheek, and the eldar female breathed in short painful gasps. Her oval eyes affixed to Jagg and the pupils dilated while the blue within her gaze swirled in strange patterns.

Jagg leaned back and wiped grime and sweat from his brow.

"Did you bring the orks?" the thought nagged at him suddenly. It was all too convenient that they were sent there to fight eldar only for orks to show up the day after the Men of Krieg touched down on the agricultural world.

"We brought you both," she said in soft and heavily accented Low Gothic. Her words lacked emotion beyond an unsettling serenity for a being who

was obviously wounded and in pain.

"Why?" Jagg asked and when she didn't speak he shook her, "Why?"

"Only the Farseer truly knows. But it is clear enough to me. Fate has strands. One strand ensured the orks came here. Another that they went elsewhere. Better here. Better that barbarian fights barbarian. Better that you mon-keigh die fighting the fungal mistakes. If not, then the orks would have gone elsewhere. Or you would have gone elsewhere. Somewhere perhaps important."

She coughed and more bright blood, that shimmered, escaped to stain her perfectly shaped lips.

Jagg shook his head and drops of his sweat landed on the eldar's face, marring her otherwise pristine skin. He picked up his weapon and stood up. He staggered back. Away from the bizarre alien.

"You led them here!? So they would fight us and not you? I don't understand. You're here as well. You will die too if the orks win. You are here like us! Trap-" Jagg looked at the archway and a thought struck, "Or are you?"

Though he had gotten off of her, the female eldar did not move, nor answer. She remained sprawled out in front of the gateway when unexpectedly it shimmered once more. Another eldar stepped out from the rippling pool of energy.

The alien's face was hidden by its helm but Jagg could sense its surprise. Its weapon wasn't even leveled. Jagg's was within a second.

Jagg held his lasgun and remembered with a bit of rising bile in his throat that it wasn't working. He shivered and backed up keeping the muzzle pointed at the newly arrived alien. Jagg looked at the female he had brought low then nodded to the helmed eldar.

"Take her and go. Get out of here."

The eldar paused, unsure. It then crept towards its wounded brethren and knelt. Unable to handle her and its weapon it fastened its pale white gun to its hip and with gauntleted hands grasped the female around the arms and started to haul her back towards the archway and freedom.

Jagg remembered his time in the Rad. After killing Bunderson, Callum had let the others go and Jagg had done nothing to stop it. Hauster had nearly killed Jagg for that. They were a threat to his section, the whole platoon, and he had let them go. Jagg looked at the two eldar. They were beautiful and unnatural, yet captivating to just look upon. They were the enemy.

Jagg steeled his heart. They had led the orks here and now the whole 76th Regiment was faced with annihilation because it served some unknowable eldar purpose. To let the xenos go would be like letting fifteen hundred of Bunderson's cronies escape unpunished; to cause more harm, to kill more men when it suited them. Jagg had told the eldar to go, but only so that the healthy alien would be busy with the wounded one.

Jagg whispered a prayer to the Machine Spirit of his lasgun and released the power clip with a press of a button, in a smooth motion he replaced it with a fresh one from his pocket. He snapped the weapon to full auto and aimed low and gently squeezed the trigger, just like Sergeant Hauster had taught him. The practiced motion took only seconds.

Red light stitched up the eldar female's leg and torso, her beautiful head cast back and her eyes widened in death. The one carrying her took three rounds to its chest and fell back, falling into the portal dragging the female with it as they both died. Jagg continued firing, sending blazing light into the archway. Each lasgun shot caused the portal to ripple and Jagg hoped whatever was on the other side got the message.

White light blinded Jagg momentarily and when his when the flash faded, he still could not see. Jagg brought his hands to his face but saw nothing. He gave an animal-like whine at the thought of being blinded. Jagg looked up and gradually saw stars forming.

"Oh, thank the Emperor."

Jagg could not see well because the alien gateway was gone, and with it, its pale blue light. There was no sign to mark them ever being there except for the female's gun. Jagg looked at the bone white weapon before walking away. He didn't bother even guessing which direction was the best to go.

It was late morning when Jagg returned to the starport. He had seen the blackened hills come sunrise and made his way towards them, thankful that no orks had arrived during the night or during his lonely journey back.

A sense of dread filled Jagg as he neared the spaceport. What if the orks had overrun it? But a quick survey allayed that fear and Jagg could see the trenches were manned with men in charcoal-hued uniforms. Not wanting to get shot by his own Jagg raised his weapon over his head with both hands and trudged back to the lines.

"Over here! Here! You get lost? " Taubover leaned up from the trenches, and propped his hand on one of the many ork bodies that acted like sandbags.

Jagg jogged wearily to his sergeant and clambered into the trench. It smelt of men. Of sweat, fear, piss and feces, not to mention rotting ork. Jagg was comforted by it all.

"Yeah, lost."

He wasn't sure if he should even bother telling them about his encounter with the eldar. He for one doubted if they'd believe him, and given most their attitudes, would they even care that it was the eldar who led both them and the orks to Jendra IV? Jagg doubted it. The enemy that was important to them, was the one right in front of their faces.

Jagg smacked his parched lips and felt his missing tooth sharply, "Any water? Food?"

"Not really. Grieg, you have anything?"

The vox man tossed a canteen to the sergeant who in turn handed it over to a grateful Jagg. Taubover watched him drink and took the canteen back.

"You look like sh*t soldier, [CCH] he said. [STS] Well lets fill you in. We snuck up on an ork landing sight and waited for the storm troopers, who came in on a low flying, and might I add, very loud Valkyrie flyer. Not only that, they went directly over our heads ensuring the orks couldn't miss us.

Bast*rds. Nasty firefight. Big ork was killed, and we ran back. Well, most of us. The glory boys flew back. A few in the platoon were killed including yourself. I'll change the records to show you made it back."

Lufsen sighed, "So now here we are back in our own sh*t, literally. Disease will kill us if the orks don't. You should have stayed dead, conscript."

Jagg waivered in place a moment and asked quietly, "So, their leader is dead? It's over?"

General laughter rippled from the section and Taubover tilted his shell shaped helmet back as he spoke, "Hardly, conscript. We killed a leader, not the leader. The orks will be busy in this zone for a day or so as they sort out who {PU2} is in charge. Gives us time to get ready. {CCH} Taubover yawned and continued, {STS} Leutnant von Zietdel assures me the local PDF will drop on by to get us ammo, food, and water. Then we rest up, and start digging. More trenches, bigger trenches, better trenches. We'll alternate between First and Second Platoon. We'll have proper diggers and the like, don't worry about fiddling about with your ten-ninety. The orks will come, and each day we'll try and make it a tougher fight."

"Till when? When does it stop Sergeant?"

Jagg slid his back against the trench and held his head in his hands. His head was starting to hurt from a lack of food and general exhaustion.

The older man raised a brow and said, "Stop? It doesn't stop. We kill them or they kill us. That's how it goes with orks. Can take years."

"The eldar?" Jagg looked up from his hands to the image of a slightly smiling Taubover.

"Impatient kid. We'll kill them next. They'll have to get in line for now. Sleep for a bit. That {PU2} is an order {CCH}

Taubover looked over at Callum, {STS} You {PU2} re, Callum, right? Kick this conscript when the orks or food shows up."

The sergeant of section four turned and leaned against the trench wall and reworked his weapon beneath the barricade of dead green bodies.*

IX

No Middle Ground

Sub-Sector Lord Trajean, supreme master of Segmentum Tempestus, defender of Bakka, ever-foe of Hive Fleet Leviathan's splinters, water bringer of Tallarn, and his most holy and blessed Cathedral builder of Valedor, not to mention his most noble hereditary lord of Hiveworld Gladius, was not having a good day. Despite his desire to spend his time observing some interesting artistic performances; involving women, hoops, fire and chainswords, at a well to do event, he instead had to handle a series of small nuisances.

He sat upon his hovering dais in an audience hall consisting of massive pillars decorated with long dead saints and a domed ceiling which bore a glorious rendition of Lord Trajean's father single handedly holding at bay a swarm of foul Tyranids. The event never happened, per se, but symbolically Lord Trajean, current and former, believed it to be quite accurate.

The first in a series of nuisances started as usual with his advisors. A few amongst them warned Trajean that his lackadaisical approach to governing the Sub-Sector could lead to trouble with the Administratum. Their concerns he handled easily enough with a few words on how his style of rule was "progressive" in a galaxy gone stagnant. The second nuisance was harder to deal with; it was that reedy petitioner. The one he was sure was insulting, even in his obsequiousness.

The small man knelt before the grandness of Lord Trajean on his hovering dais and spoke softly, "My lord, the situation on Jendra IV has taken a turn for the worse. Orks."

"Yes, yes I know all that. I sent the necessary forces to handle the ork incursion. They having trouble already? Well, tell the Planetary Governor that-"



"My, lord." The small man interrupted.




Lord Trajean had not been interrupted in some time. One did not interrupt a Sub-Sector Lord, certainly not a petitioner. His face turned red and he prepared to let out a stream of verbal wrath upon the Administratum flunky.

While building up his ire, the thin man was able to continue, "You indeed, wisely sent forces to quell the orks. On Yesporis. I am speaking of the Orks on Jendra IV. You sent only a single regiment of Death Korps to handle an alien threat. The arrival of the orks there is a recent and might I add unexpected event. An event only you can address, my lord."

The large man was caught off guard and he nodded slowly, just as his father had taught him as he pondered aloud wracking his brain.

"Yes. Well, I- Wait! Didn't Jendra IV have a problem with a more unusual alien menace? I don't recall it being orks. Is the first problem handled?"

"Of course, my Lord. Jendra IV's original problem is no more. You ah,  the reedy man licked his lips,  handled it. The orks are a new threat, not to be confused with Yesporis' problem of the same nature. If I recall you said you had some plan to deal with Jendra IV. Kapitän von Gotslieb of the 76th Death Korps, as well as the Planetary Governor, are eager to know of your intentions." The robed man kept his head low and averted his eyes as he spoke.

The Sub-Sector Lord kept nodding and he even let out a deep "Hmmm." All of which was meant to stall for time, given he had no plan, nor much of an idea of Jendra IV's particular problems. He didn't  like it when  solved  problems returned to his attention.

"Eager indeed! Well, the ork threat has to be crushed. You are aware of some of my plan are you not? I do hope you've been keeping up on my designs when dealing with sudden ork incursions," the Sub-Sector Lord asked.

The small man was silent a moment then glanced up, "I believe so, but it is hard for one such as me, to fully grasp your intentions. Would I be wrong to say that you knew full well that Kreig is the closest planet to Jendra IV that has a significant armed force and that perhaps a more sizeable fleet should pick up five or so regiments of the Death Korps and reinforce the 76th?"

Trajean paused, something at the back of his mind prickled. He mumbled aloud, "So many Death Korps regiments in the same place. Something like that doesn't happen often. Hasn't happened in a long time because- He coughed. The past was the past!

Which is why...I wish it to be. About time the Death Korps do more than just scatter about the galaxy looking to get themselves killed. Now then, sending a whole army of the bast*rds requires a general. I'll have to see if my third cousin has rested up from his past ordeal with the Dornadon." Sub-Sector Lord Trajean tapped his various chins in thought as to what political favors could be wrangled from key appointments to the army.

"Of course, it will be done. An excellent plan! However, time is of the essence, my lord. If Jendra IV falls before reinforcements arrive, this could be a problem that lasts decades. Tithes and lives lost and so on. Krieg will have someone who can act as general I'm sure. We can have him report to you and manage things till you choose a better person, " the thin man offered with a meek tone.

The Sub-Sector Lord still felt mildly insulted by the fellow always interrupting and contradicting him. It didn't matter if he was right or not! Still...

"Fine, fine, let them sort it out. I'll send someone suitable when I have the time. You can handle all the details? I'll be sure to sign all the proper writs."

"Of course, my lord. Of course. The First Army of Krieg will be born by your will."

The siege lines were improved. Trenches were widened and flakboard put into place to act as extra reinforcements. Rather than long lines, the trench systems zigzagged. The primary trench was given rockrete bunkers, makeshift barracks, proper latrines, and transit trenches which led to underground rooms filled with an ever dwindling stockpile of supplies. Razor wire was strung up in front of the primary trench and hooked up to generators to give them a deadly electric life. Mines were catapulted out before the trenches and left unburied and unhidden, their sole purpose one of delay.

The orks came and died and came again. Each time they came in greater number, and each time the Death Korps defenses had improved; just enough.

While the trenches were cut into earth, digging machines turned the slab of the starport into a more formidable defense point. A final fallback position should the primary and secondary trenches collapse in an area of the siege known as "Three Hills".

During the week the orks were not idle either. Besides their waves of attacks they kept firm control of Jendra IV's skies. The Ork Rok remained perpetually in orbit above Kynder, and from there sent out fresh landers, and a variety of aircraft. Jagg had learned through rumor, and thus it may not have been true, that the Imperial ship which had transported them to Jendra IV was safe, but stuck on the opposite end of the planet. The {PU1} big boat {PU2} lacked the abilities to take the ork space-monstrosity on. Still, from time to time rumor insisted the {PU1} big boat {PU2} was sending down supplies. Jagg could only hope.

In addition to the air raids, and infantry attacks the orks had built some form of siege weaponry behind Three Hills. From over the black mounds of ash the occasional crudely built missile would fly. Sometimes it exploded early, sometimes it sailed up into the sky and didn't come back and sometimes it hit the trenches dead on. They would blast wide a gaping hole in the lines and force hasty repairs before the latest ork assault could exploit it.

Those that had scouted beyond Three Hills said the orks didn't have entrenchments, but instead camped in the open, and worked on their machines without fear. They seemed to know the Imperials lacked the strength to leave their ditches for long and settled into the routine of being on the offensive.

Jagg hated the ork war cry, hated the eldar for getting them into this mess, and hated his food. It had progressively degraded and the brown-clad PDF soldiers were unrepentant for it. The least the Jendrites could do was make decent meals given that the Death Korps were dying for their planet. Well, at least for one city; Jagg was told the rest of Jendra IV was on its own and not faring so well.

War had burned away the grass of Jendra IV and replaced it with craters, rotting bodies and a pall of smoke as well as continual sounds of small arms fire. Air craft buzzed and artillery thundered. As each day slid past, Jagg was reminded of home given the way the surface of Jendra IV was ending up. It was bitter-sweet to Jagg that the sight of craters, mud, and a hazy sky brought back memories of his mother and the wife he hardly knew. No ration cards had arrived. Nothing had arrived from HQ save the continual promise that help was on the way but no details as to when that would be. No confirmation that the big boat was still up there. Nothing but rumors to cling to.

Warm days passed by and each ork attack was much like the next. For Jagg the attacks brought on fear that became terror and spun into chaotic ferocity. The high emotion then turned into an almost mental collapse as the battle ended and a period of numb exhaustion set in. There was little to look forward to. At least Lufsen had patched up his broken tooth.

Jagg was sitting in an underground barrack with only the light from the open doors to see by. Callum and Kellen Raous sat nearby, sharing a lho stick. Jagg still couldn't figure out how to smoke the things. His wife would have been amused. Lho sticks did more than just pass the time in the trenches. They were a form of currency; as valuable as the non-existent ration cards. Jagg did not smoke them often, but he was not above collecting them for barter. Two packs could purchase a grenade, three a pistol.

Sergeant Taubover stepped into the barracks. His face was thinner, his cheeks bristling with stubble. Weary gray eyes narrowed as he peered into the structure and smiled his wry smile.

"There's my children. Kapitän himself wants a patrol by night. Wants to see what the orks are up to past the Three Hills. Scopies are too valuable, troopers are not." He waved a hand and sighed, "Don't give me that look, boys. Leutnant picked a squad at random and said the troopers would go. Lucky you, he picked section four. And who are my troopers? You three. Be ready for tonight and oh," he added as an afterthought, "Leutnant is going with you. It'll be interesting."

Jagg and his companions cursed and complained, but neither changed a thing. Jagg had never been on a night patrol, and in fact his only real experience at night combat involved getting lost and stumbling into eldar.

The veterans of the regiment, men like Sergeant Taubover, the heavy stubber operator Klyst and the others were not very friendly, but they did have advice and Jagg was beyond pride. He took all they had to offer despite condescending tones.

"Face paint. Black, even eyelids. Wear gloves or smudge up the hands," was the Sergeant's advice.

"Get a las pistol. Borrow it, steal it, buy it, whatever. Lasgun isn't useful out there. A firefight starts and you need to kill them quick and quiet. Knife is good too, but an ork is an ork. Best pop them point blank with a laspistol. In the head you hear?" Klyst advised tapping his own helm.

"Never run away blind. You'll step on one of our own landmines, or get shot by us. Come back the way you came in. Always," was the advice of the morose stop-gap medicae Lufsen.

Come sunset, Jagg assembled, in face paint with a "borrowed" laspistol, along with Kellen Raous and Callum. Callum who was still unwilling to loot the dead, and unwilling to steal, settled on a knife he borrowed from Sheer. Jagg resented Callum's high mindedness. For a boy born and bred in some of Krieg's less than savory levels, he had the attitude of a saint. Kellen Raous remained as cheery about his lot in life as always, an outlook Jagg could appreciate easier. Even though he had an inkling Kellen Raous might be mad.

Leutnant von Zietdel arrived looking every part a footslogger. He had swapped out his officer's uniform for a trooper's tunic, and even donned face paint, though he forewent a helmet and still had on his visored cap.

The Leutnant looked the three over and pursed his lips as he spoke, "Dear me. Young aren't you all? Well, doesn't matter. We're to sneak over those hills yonder and see what the orks are up to. Hauptman Ostriker has one of

his inclinations. You know how it goes. Or, well, no you don't. You see our kompanie commander-" the strange officer laughed, "There I go again. Follow me. Don't shoot lest you have to. We've opened a path through the electric wire. Just follow me closely? Right then!"

Together they walked to a ladder leading out of the primary trench, over some sand bags and out into the crater marked landscape. Jagg's time on Jendra IV had improved his night vision, but he wouldn't call himself adept at seeing in the dark. Lying prone, they began to crawl forth along a route Leutnant von Zietdel picked. Around the landmines Jagg crawled, though he became a touch nervous that the iron-gray disks would explode without provocation. Thankfully none of the night patrol blew itself up.

Over and through mounds of rotted ork flesh they crawled and the smell became so thick and dense that Jagg had to deny his urge to retch. He longed for a re-breather mask. Jagg followed the shifting black boots of the Leutnant and at times he looked back to see the shape of Callum and Raous crawling behind him. Their progress was slow and to keep noise to a minimum they carried little besides small arms and the clothes on their back. The Leutnant had a pair of mag-optics tucked in a holster around his waist.

In silence they moved, reaching the base of the ashen hills. More confident, Leutnant von Zietdel rose to a crouch and with a hand gesture beckoned the others to do the same. He walked in a stooped manner up the hill, gingerly stepping over ork bodies and around crater holes.

Jagg did the same and clutched his pilfered laspistol in a sweaty, dirty hand. Jagg could not see nor hear any other movement besides their own, but if an ork was out there hiding, not only would it hear them, Jagg was sure it would see them. The orks apparently had better night vision than humans.

Near the top of the hill Leutnant von Zietdel returned to a prone crawl and Jag went down with him. He looked back and signaled to Callum and Raous who also started to resume crawling. One by one they pushed themselves to the top of the hill and looked beyond to see what the alien horde was up to.

It was night, but the orks used fire liberally. Campfires dotted the landscape haphazardly. The fires cast flickering orange light onto ramshackle shelters made from all manner of items as well as the shadowy shapes of orks and smaller creatures called gretchin, which served as camp followers and laborers.

Jagg's eyes took in the sight of the endless camps and he turned his gaze skyward as he saw a contrail of smoke, slightly illuminated by the flames of a lander. No doubt it had been spat forth from the orkish asteroid and was heading for some part of Jendra IV to wreak havoc. By day and night ork reinforcements landed on Jendra IV steadily ensuring their victory over the human defenders of Kynder. Jagg could only wonder what horrors the orks had visited upon the planet's distant continents. Beyond the safety of the 76th's guns Jagg imagined the orks killed and slaughtered at will.

"Oh, bad luck for us lads. Will you look at that," Leutnant von Zietdel said as he peered through the pair of mag-optics. Von Zietdel handed the expensive equipment to Jagg and he carefully gazed into the visor.

The mag-optics cast the world in a vibrant green and made the shapes of every object sharp and defined. Jagg could see clearly orks, tents, shacks, makeshift garages, the rocket pads, and then the bad luck the Leutnant mentioned. Nestled within the camps were mounds of earth and holes. From the holes gangly gretchin scurried, carting buckets of fresh earth. Jagg exhaled a long breath and passed the mag-optics on.

"What are they up to?" Callum whispered as he let Raous have a look.

"Tunnels," Jagg answered before Leutnant von Zietdel had to.

"Hauptman Ostriker's inclination seems to have proved true. Not a tunnel, but tunnels. Plural. More than we can counter-mine, sabotage, or collapse with artillery bombardments. Not that we can waste the shells."

When the mag-optics were returned the Leutnant took a final survey then returned the item to the satchel at his waist.

"What exactly does that mean though, sir?" Callum asked.

"Hmmm? Oh! Well it means the orks will tunnel under our first two trenches in a variety of places and we either let them surround our forward defenses or fall back before they emerge. Naturally we'll do the latter. The orks will then have our own trenches to use, lest we bury them, and be on the very doorstep of the starport. Once they get past our fortifications Kynder's done for. Lest something changes, we'll be dead fairly soon," the Leutnant reported without a trace of concern.

"Sir, the Kapitän has to know. Shall we get back?" Jagg jerked his head in the direction of their darkened trenches.

Von Zietdel smiled kindly. "I'm afraid Kapitän von Gotslieb has a host of other problems besides this. He has the entire regiment to command and every angle of Kynder to protect. Just look at our battalion commander for instance. Major Stekman has other tunnels to counter, not just these, random ork air raids, and the usual frontal attacks wearing him down. So, no help to be had from the Grosse-Kapitän. He's busy you might say! Hauptman Ostriker is in charge of this specific area, but we've hardly the men in the kompanie to hold it, let alone thwart an ork attack that will bypass our lines.

"I think a swift strike of the likes we did to finish that ork war boss isn't going to work either." Von Zietdel shrugged casually, as if it were of no great concern.

Kellen Raous laughed softly, "Sir, sounds like we are rather doomed."

The Leutnant smiled, "Oh yes, quite. You get used to the feeling in time. I shall however, speak to the Kapitän myself. Just in case he can spare us some men and material. We're related don't you know? He might have something for us. Probably not. Well, enough chatting about things you troopers need not bother yourselves with! Back we go."

Jagg blinked at the almost careless attitude von Zietdel took towards their impending destruction and blamed it squarely on insanity. Had not Sergeant Taubover said that all men went crazy in the 76th Regiment?

With a final look to the glowing firelight of the ork camps, Jagg and the rest of the night patrol began their slow return back to the trenches to warn the rest of how their bad situation had become decidedly worse.

By the time Jagg awoke in his barracks and ate a cold breakfast, the whole of First Platoon had heard the news that the orks were tunneling in force. The rumors started as to what would be done in response. Jagg was grateful no one offered up the potentially very real possibility that nothing at all would be done.

Jagg took his place in the line, nestled within the earthy confines of the trench, and watched the Three Hills. He imagined he could hear the mining gretchin at work beyond and below; tunneling, closer and closer.

No ork attacks on foot came during the day, nor the next three days after that but their flying machinery appeared in greater numbers. Swarms of ork craft angrily buzzed through the air and their continual presence forced the regiment's tanks to stay close to the starport and the relative safety of its anti-air defenses.

Every sign pointed to an ork buildup and it was obvious the orks were trying to pin down the regiment's defenses. How orks could manage to concoct a plan, other than a straightforward charge, was beyond Jagg.

It appeared the flyers were purposely keeping the tanks at bay in concert with the marshaling of ork ground forces, yet it seemed so strange. How did they coordinate? As far as Jagg could tell, the orks didn't communicate all that much with one another, beyond grunts and laughter.

The ork flying machines would occasionally crash into one another and shatter into pieces. Sometimes they would just fall out of the sky and become another crater dotting the landscape. Sometimes the cockpit would just fall apart and an ork would fall hundreds of feet to the churned up ground below. Bets amongst the men were quickly placed on if the xenos would die or not. It was the only bit of humor in the trenches.

On the fourth day since the discovery of the tunnels behind Three Hills, Kapitan von Gotslieb's help arrived in the form of five hundred soldiers. Jagg watched from his trench with apprehension as Kynder's civilians supported by walking-wounded PDF wearily made their way from the starport entrenchments.

They were women, men, even a few children, who looked rail thin and hardly able to lift the bolt-actions, pistols, and melee weapons they had been issued. Ushering them across the field Jagg could see a man in a storm-coat of black and several soldiers in familiar charcoal. It was the Regimental Commissar Razin and his assistants.

Jagg had heard rumors about the man and been told to avoid him at all costs. The word was that the Commissar was going to give the kompanie, and namely First and Second Platoon, a painful, personal visit any time now.

Taubover shook his head and spat. "That's it, all. Grieg just got the order. We're to gather up all we can and make our way to the starport defenses. All transit trenches are to be buried. Shame. Get what you can, climb out and don't stay in the open long. We are abandoning the primary and secondary trenches."

Grieg lovingly packed up his vox unit.

"What are those civilians doing, Sergeant?" Callum asked with concern. He looked at Jagg for a moment.

"Taking our places, conscript. The Kapitän has determined that everyone is to fight. If we are to be victorious then the orks must be stalled as long as possible. Those men and women will man the trenches and when the orks come, keep them occupied. Long enough for us to do our bit," Taubover said as he holstered his lasgun over his shoulder.

"By the Throne?! We came here to save these people not sacrifice them!" Callum exclaimed.


Jagg had had enough of Callum's idealism and snapped out before Taubover could, "To save Krieg our ancestors killed its surface and drove our people beneath its crust. We did that to ourselves remember? Better that those people die than the enemy get their hands on their damnable world. It's **THEIR** time they fight. This is their planet. They need to act like it."

"Really? Better they die? Look at them Jagg, there are children in that mob. What good is the land if the people are all fricking dead?" Callum shook his head no.

Jagg snarled, "So long as the land is ours is all that matters. Why do you think it is so odd that they fight for their own world? You do the same. For Krieg. Better they die, and after that better we die and after that better the world dies than let the orks have it."

"The cost of victory is-" Callum began in a lecturing tone of voice.

Jagg cut him off with a roar of anger he had felt bubbling inside him, "Is always worth the price! Victory is what matters, Callum. Not you and your morals, or them, or me, or even the bloody sergeant here or the fricking officers.

 Victory is what matters. We win! We. We as in humanity. We win by killing the orks or killing ourselves and this whole damned planet. So long as we win!"

Tauber placed himself between Jagg and Callum. "Enough! You squabbling children. You two think too much for your own good. I don't want to hear it. What's it matter what either of you think? What anyone thinks? Just do as you are told. Kill the ork, get Krieg one step closer to redemption in the eyes of the Emperor. Simple, eh? Move it you whining philosophers." Tauber didn't step aside until they both started moving as ordered.

Jagg went to their makeshift barracks and collected his minimal kit, slinging it along with his weapon onto his shoulder. He paid Callum no mind, ignoring his self-righteous glares. Once ready Jagg clambered out of the trench and began to march his way back to the secondary trench.

Temporary bridges of flakboard had been laid across the trenches so as to facilitate the swapping of Death Korps for Jendrites. Jagg spared only a few looks to the dirty and slump shouldered civilians as they traded places with him.

There wasn't time to give a damn. Mercy wouldn't be a kindness. If the orks won, then Jagg was sure the people of Kynder were better off dead, given the rumors he had picked up about what was happening on the rest of Jendra IV to the human population. Perhaps he felt a flicker of sympathy. But the roar of ork engines in the sky squashed it. There wasn't time to pity. It was time to win, or die.

"Getting touchy all cramped up in those trenches. Tempers flare and all that." Kellen Raous jogged up next to Jagg and offered an easy smile.

"I suppose. Doesn't seem to get to you though, Kellen."

"No, I guess it doesn't. But I see it like this. Let's say I tested out of the Call like number fifty." Kellen Raous stumbled in a small crater hole and Jagg had to help him up again.

"Number fifty?"

"Yeah, back on Krieg. Forty nine of us joined B-03. We were always one man down. You were section leader remember? Keyser and his ammo concerns..." Kellen Raous prompted.

Jagg's eyes blinked. "Seems like forever ago."

"Hardly. About two months or so. Hard to say given transit in the warp is all funny. But you remember. Some fellow did well enough in schola that he didn't have to answer the Call. Or he did, and they took him away to do something behind the lines so to speak. Run this, build that, you know?" Kellen smirked and continued, "Anyways, what a dull life. That poor scab is probably staring at a logic-engine and will do so till the day he dies. Not me. I get to travel in starships. Visit whole new worlds. I get to be terrorized by aliens and kill them. People talk of Krieg's redemption, I get to live it."

Jagg raised a brow, "I don't follow."

"I like it, Achim. I really do. I wouldn't trade it for anything." Kellen patted him on the shoulder and slowed up to speak with Callum who was

hanging back.

"I think we are all going mad." Jagg murmured to himself, which of course was a clear sign that he was right.

Behind Jagg, in their abandoned trenches, the rabble of civilians took their positions, under the stern eye of the black-clad Commissar.

X

The Price

The Kapitän knew his siege works. He knew the tactics of entrenchment including that of tunneling. He must have known it down to an exact science, Jagg decided. As the sun set the orks attacked on the very same day the civilians took the positions once held by First and Second Platoon. The switch had been made swiftly; so quick that Jagg doubted the orks even knew it had occurred. The Kapitän had done well.

The last rays of the sun had vanished and stars dotted the sky, obscured by smoke from a hundred fires scattered about the land. Jendra IV had no natural moon, only the ugly blur of the ork asteroid in high orbit.

From atop the hills came a gurgling mechanical groan. Moments later a whining siren screamed out, its horrendous call blaring for miles around. Men instantly startled at the cacophony.

Jagg and the rest of the men tucked behind the solid barrier of rockrete; the final defense of the starport would hold, or all of Kynder would fall, and Jendra IV with it. Jagg knew he was not alone. All around Kynder, Men of Krieg tucked tight behind walls that were taller than an ork. A ring of rockrete that would hold, or all was lost.

Beams of luminous, yellow light streamed up from behind the Three Hills into the night sky, slicing it like a dagger. Jagg thought the orks for some mad and inexplicable reason had switched on skyward pointing spotlights. The yellow sickly beams then crested the hill and glared angrily down upon the first trench, revealing the glow to be the blazing headlights of

countless vehicles. The glare they cast was bright, and Jagg could only make out dim shapes of roaring bikes, trundling tanks, and large trucks—all of which blasted out with loud shrieking sirens. The orks were signaling their attack.



So loud was the display of xenos power, that the creatures beneath the earth heard the sirens and felt the rumble of a hundred wheels, and thousands of stomping feet. Tunnels were revealed in geysers of earth. Green death emerged.

Clouds of dust coated the landscape and the lights from the vehicles became obscured. The shooting began in earnest. Flashes of light rippled up and down the primary and secondary trench as the civilians fired fearfully into the dusty cloud forming about them.

The ork war machines started to advance and their engines growled like living monsters, their sirens still calling out balefully. Jagg could not see the primary trench anymore but could hear them even from so far away; men and women were screaming, their pitiful wails broken up by sporadic small-arms fire and guttural roars.

"Don't fire till ordered to," Taubover said curtly and hefted his lasgun, resting it atop the gray rockrete barrier. The slate-gray barrier had firing steps on the interior side and the exterior walls were built high enough to tower over even an ork.

Klyst slid back the bolt of his heavy stubber and Sheer cracked open every ammo case they had left at their disposal. Munitions were running shy.

Jagg checked his power clip, ensured his weapon was on single fire, and glanced at his belt where the black razor-sharp bayonet dangled. It wasn't time to fix it to his weapon, not yet, and when the time came things would be beyond bad. He prayed to the Emperor they would avoid  Chop Range .

From the smoke and dust Jagg could see lumbering brutish shapes emerge, spilling out in all directions from holes in the ground between the primary and secondary defensive lines. They were firing and bellowing out in their

deep throaty language. The freshly emerged orks were confused as to where exactly they should level their wrath. Some vanished in the floating cloud of dust, which draped over the primary trench, others turned on the secondary and began their loping advance. They made rapid headway in the face of some odd two hundred poorly trained civilians armed with bolt-action slug throwers and near useless swords and clubs. Some began to run, begging the Emperor for his protection. Jagg knew that short of divine intervention, the civilians were doomed. It was their purpose. To their credit, Jagg saw many level their weapons and begin to clumsily fire at their oncoming death.

Some orks fell only to rise again, most didn't even pause, though Jagg was sure they were being hit. A hundred yards was crossed in little time and by then the ork vehicles had emerged from the debris kicked up by the tunnelers.

They were hulking machines painted in dull red and daubed in slashes of white and black. Heavy slug throwers and autocannons thundered and chattered in devastating sprays. Upon one ork tank, which looked suspiciously like a converted Imperial Guard Lemman Rus, a turret swung and a large barreled weapon fired. Earth sprayed up from the secondary trench and Jagg could make out the shapes of human bodies, and parts of bodies, flung skywards. He gritted his teeth. There wasn't time to care, he reminded himself.

Civilians died in droves but the ork attack stalled, if only to revel and enjoy in the slaughter occurring in both trenches.

Thud, Thud, Thud, Thud.

Jagg felt the shells passing over head and didn't need to look back to see the quad artillery pieces hurling forth their retribution. They had sighted the area well and explosions smashed amongst ork and man alike. The siren's blare and the ork's roar gave way to the booming thuds caused by the aptly named guns. Ash, dust and black rich smoke from burst vehicles coated the area like a painter gone mad with brush and ink.

Jagg could only make out the orange hue of flames within the rising cloud of war. The barrage was brief, perhaps the last the Death Korps could afford in this sector. Jagg knew this was not the only place the war was being fought, he could hear artillery all around, hear small-arms fire, even the buzzing sound of distant ork flyers diving in for the kill. The war was everywhere but before Three Hills it paused for a moment, and Jagg found himself waiting. His heart skipped a beat as anticipation iced his veins. He curled his hands tight about his weapon for comfort, and peered at the lingering debris cloud.

The orks were turned into stumbling silhouettes within the smoke. A few wandered out of the haze and seeing themselves alone wandered back in. Some speeding ork bikes raced out of the debris cloud but only fired a few stray shots, none of which even hit the rockcrete barrier, before quickly speeding back into the hazy cover. For a time a stillness settled upon the field and Jagg felt the rising anticipation of not only himself but the men at his side.

A few were whispering prayers and Jagg found his own dry and parched lips moving as he did the same. He was halfway through the prayer when they came.

The hated war cry burst out of from the debris cloud. So loud was it, it felt like a sonic shockwave and the Men of Krieg leaned back, as if buffeted.



 Shut up,  Jagg hissed.

The orks charged from the cloud in a raging wall of green flesh and haphazardly built machinery. Amongst the orks on foot tottered walking metal cans, while bikes blazed by, and heavy tanks churned up the earth before them. There was no order to their dispositions, but there was purpose. As one entity the ork horde howled out their cry and moved towards the Death Korps. They had slaughtered the civilians of the first two trenches, and all that remained was the rockcrete barrier manned by the exhausted Death Korps. The beasts could taste their impending victory. They were a barrier away from owning a world.

Taubover barked out, "We do not fall back. There is no back. Fire at three hundred yards. Fix at fifty. Grenades at ten. Understand?", his voice croaked as he strained to be heard over the xenos shouts and machines.

"Yes, Sergeant!" the section replied in unison.

A few rockets streamed out from the other sections and slammed into the ork vehicles. A truck laden with agitated orks was struck and flipped under the force of the explosion. Orks were launched out of the vehicle and landed hard, hard enough to kill a man but not an ork. Most got up and charged. A few laughed. One of the ork tanks took a solid punch to its turret and the rocket burned through and exploded with a hollow thoom! Fire leapt from the open hatch and an ork wreathed in orange flames tried vainly to climb out. It slipped and fell back into the hellish inferno. The orks laughed at that too. There were precious few rockets and too many ork machines.

Four hundred yards. Jagg wondered if the sacrifice of the civilians would be enough; enough to thin the ork numbers and break apart what little organization they had. He drew the stock of his weapon taut against his shoulder, he tilted his head and leveled the front and back sight.  Slide to diamond,  he whispered. With care he aimed at one of the distant green beasts. Gently he slid his finger about the curved trigger and held a breath, released it, held it, released it. Just as Hauster taught him.

Three hundred and fifty yards. Jagg felt his heart racing. The orks were backlit by the headlights of vehicles and the burning fires of destruction, their eyes glinted an angry red and their teeth glistened with saliva.

Three hundred yards. Jagg gently squeezed and felt the weapon push back into his shoulder. There was no time to see if his shot dropped the ork, he instead aimed for the next nearest, aimed just below its throat and pulled the trigger. This time he saw the bolt of red light strike the ork in the chest. Too low. Jagg aimed a touch higher and squeezed off a bolt. Just right. Then the next target. And the next. And the one after that. Too many of them!

Two hundred and fifty yards. They came and Jagg kept up the rapid pace of firing. He heard the ripping fabric of Klyst's heavy stubber and the whizzing snap of First and Second Platoon's lasguns. A chorus of weapons fire met the ork battle-cry head on.

Two hundred yards. Jagg knew his cell was about dry. He ducked low and out of view as he pulled out the spent cell and slapped in a new one. Jagg was moving as fast as he could but when he returned to his position the orks had closed the range further than he thought possible. So many of them!

One hundred yards. Jagg switched to full auto and sent out small bursts of lasgun fire. Ork slugs chipped at their fortification but the creatures never were good shots. Hard for a trained man to hit a target tucked behind a wall, let alone an ork who preferred to use its slug thrower as a club. The orks made up for their lack of skill with numbers, with mindless drive, with what Jagg had to call **[PU1]**bravery**[PU2]**. Insane yes, but brave none the less.

Klyst's head snapped back and his helmet spun off his head, the bull necked gunner teetered and fell off the firing step onto the ground behind them. Klyst**[PU2]**'s limbs splayed in a most unnatural way.

Sheer didn't pause to look back at his fallen gunner, but instead took control of the heavy stubber, whose ripping bursts were hardly interrupted.

"FIX!"

It was some other sergeant whose voice Jagg heard and it was the signal that the orks were only fifty yards away. Jagg ducked behind cover and chips of rockrete flew over his head as orks slugs pattered like rain upon the defenders.

The move was quick and easy, and the bayonet fit tightly into its lug beneath the hot muzzle of the lasgun. The blade threw off aim at a distance, it didn't matter up close. It was almost time for **[PU1]**Chop Range**[PU2]**. Jagg repressed a shiver.

"Handgrenadaten!"

Jagg heard the call but couldn't tell whose voice it was. Those who had stick-bombs sent them over the wall and Jagg gritted his teeth as the concussive booms blasted just outside the barrier. The whole rockrete structure then shuddered as what must have been thousands of orks collided with it. Crackles rippled along the wall, but thankfully it didn't collapse under the living battering ram.

Jagg swiftly stood and looked over the wall to gaze at a sea of green roaring creatures. The orks were piling on top of each other to scale the wall and eager vehicles were rolling over their own kind to try and breach the fortifications.

Jagg thrust his weapon down and felt the blade stick into something tough. Others along the line were doing the same. Stabbing, screaming, thrusting like mad to fling back the titanic horde.

Sheer had traversed the heavy stubber as low as he could and screamed as he sent small quick successive bursts into the orks. Flames from the muzzle of the weapon banished the night. Heavy rounds shattered the orks into hunks of flesh and sent them spinning back atop their own in an ever increasing pile.

The belt of ammo was running low but before it ran dry Sergeant Taubover ducked and ran his way across the firing steps to come to a slide next to Sheer. He dropped his weapon and focused on placing ammo in the hungry beast.

"Keep it firing!" was all Jagg heard Taubover say.

Sheer nodded and Mr. Heavy did its butcher's work.

A tank had reached the walls and its clawed treads began to scale and break apart the entrenchment in crumbling bits of stone. Orks leapt upon the garishly painted vehicle hoping to use it like an ancient siege tower.

Men of the Death Korps gave it their all to prevent this; bravely they jumped atop the tank and met the orks with thrusts and close range shots. Jagg saw two men shredded by fire from the orks swarming about the tank. Another was butchered by an axe. Another soldier was able to plant a melta-bomb and he detonated it, not even bothering to try and escape the dozen green creatures crawling towards him atop the still wall-scaling tank. It was a madness Jagg thought he could never aspire to.

Jagg's vision went white as the super-heated bomb and tank beneath it exploded. Hot flames billowed into the sky. The blazing tank slipped back into the ork ranks, sinking almost like a ship, setting more than few beasts on fire or crushing them beneath tons of melting steel.

Jagg cleared his vision and kept stabbing with his weapon, down and down again. He saw massive green faces beneath him and jabbed at them, ducking back as their blades made swipes for his arms or their pistols fired towards his exposed head and torso. Jagg saw out of the corner of his eye a Man of Krieg collapse, his chest and back burst open and smoking. He saw another man gripped by the face and pulled over the wall shrieking.

Jagg's heart thudded in his chest and tightness gripped his throat. The thought of running came into his head but a look back revealed open flat slab, three Rag-na-Rok tanks and Thud guns whose barrels were lowered to maximum depression. If Jagg and the rest ran the guns would blast them apart as well as the orks- there was no going back.

A green hand gripped the lip of the wall. Instinctively Jagg smacked the butt of his lasgun into the thick fingers, then cursed himself. Orks didn't care much about pain, nothing as minor as the bat of human's weapon would stop them. The green beast reached another hand up and dropped a stick-bomb. Jagg could almost swear the thing gave a rude gesture before vanishing back behind its side of the wall.

Jagg's eyes widened and he ducked, releasing his own lasgun to scoop up the stick-bomb. As if the item were a thousand degrees he tossed it over the wall and heard it explode the moment his hands released it. His hearing filled with a high pitched ringing and hot pain flared against his head, cheek and right arm as shrapnel embedded hotly into him. Jagg

screamed and twisted his body away from the source of his agony. He tumbled off the steps to land on the hard ground below. Klyst was there in a pool of crimson, limbs tangled, his open eyes staring at nothing.

Lufsen was at Jagg's side in an instant, his medi-bag open, his hands working. He looked as frightened as Jagg knew himself to be, with wide eyes and a trembling lower jaw. The stop-gap medicus worked with shaking hands to pick out bits of shrapnel from the youth's arm and face. It burned; Jagg screamed as each bit of shouldering metal was pulled from his flesh and sent blood coursing across his skin.

Above Lufsen Jagg could see the thin line of defenders striking down at the alien threat, and the back glow of fire and smoke which hid the stars above. The pain then stopped in the most unexpected manner. Jagg felt a giddy sensation ripple up his wounded arm and reach his bleeding head. He knew he should be in agony, but something all-together pleasant claimed his senses.

"That will help. You'll be numb and dumb in a moment, but it'll be better that way. It won't hurt as much when it happens." Lufsen withdrew a needle from Jagg's arm and left to tend to another soldier, not from their section, who collapsed back from the wall gripping at his face.

"When what happens- Oh right. Death," Jagg laughed as he felt the drugs Lufsen gave him take hold. The fight was raging above him. He had to go up. And so he stood and promptly teetered.

The world moved slowly before Jagg and he couldn't see his lasgun. He had it, but where did it go? Shaking his euphoria filled head he climbed back atop the firing steps. Men were shouting and orks were returning the cry. But fear fled Jagg, replaced by the giddy sensation of Lufsen's medicines. Jagg saw Sergeant Taubover feeding Sheer's heavy stubber. The weapon blazed magnificently!

Staggering, Jagg made his way over and knelt by Taubover. He said through lips that felt fat and cold, "Me got."

"What?" the sergeant yelled but as he saw Jagg's hands move to work the belts of ammo he nodded and ran off to tend to the collapsing line calling out orders to, "Stand Fast!".

Jagg ran his hands over the copper casing of the belted ammunition and as Sheer's gun ran dry Jagg slipped the belt into a slot on the side of the overheating weapon. It took two tries.

The weapon buzz-sawed back to life and for each blast it emitted an empty case and disintegrated belt spun out the other side. Over the lip of the chipped rockrete barrier, ork after ork was flung back by Sheer's swaying weapon. Mr. Heavy was doing a fine job of cutting the creatures down and scouring a half-moon clear of them.

Sheer was screaming, and his eyes lit up as much as the weapon he was using. He drew a lot of attention to himself and a puff of blood snapped his shoulder back. The shot sent him off the line to the ground below; the heavy stubber smoked and fell idle once more. Instantly the orks surged forward to try and scale the wall while the weapon was silent.

"Me got," Jagg said and gripped the weapon.

It was hot to the touch he imagined but he couldn't feel it, or much of anything for that matter. He started to sweep the weapon and pull the trigger, spraying out arcs of bullets till something in his drug hazed memory reminded him to point, shoot, point shoot, and not spray. The orks were flung back and landed amongst rising heaps of green flesh.

Bullets passed by Jagg on all sides and his blurry vision made out a walking tin can to his left with buzzing saw-like arms and rapidly firing guns. The machine started to sweep down upon the defenders, its serrated blade cleaving into stone and flesh with equal abandon. To his right orks had breached the wall and were beginning to spread out along the firing steps using axes and meaty fists to batter aside the men in charcoal uniforms. The heavy stubber snapped empty, returning Jagg's attention to more immediate concerns.

Jagg pulled the trigger again in a confused manner and shook his head. Something was wrong, but he couldn't recall what. Then much to his drug induced delight the weapon kicked back to life. Sheer had returned, shoulder a mess, a final can of ammo was being used to belt in the rounds. Despite his wounded hand and shoulder the ammo bearer worked speedily to see that the heavy stubber did its job.

Jagg did his own best to keep the weapon chattering away. An ork's head burst, another was hit by so many rounds that its chest opened up like a bloody flower. Another ork in red power armor shrugged off the round to its shoulders and body but a few lucky shots to its face sent it down, only for another ork to jump atop its falling comrade and try and scale the fortifications. Jagg fired his weapon near point blank range and the ork's leap was halted. It was flung back by the force of Mr. Heavy and joined the rising pile of dead.

When the weapon ran dry again Jagg looked over to Sheer who had produced a pistol with his good hand and fired shots over the wall. Wide-eyed he shook his head. That was it then, no more ammo.

Jagg hated the eldar, hated the ork and their warcry, hated the food the people of Jendra IV offered him. He had dwelled on that hate more than once. He then learned to hate something else even through his drugged up mind. He learned to hate the glory-boys.

The matt-gray Valkyrie gun ship had flown right across the open slab and kept low to the ground to avoid any ork flyers that were prowling above. Up and over the entrenchment the craft flew and banked hard to one side. Door gunners opened up sending out glowing tracer rounds into the ork mass. Soldiers in body armor and rebreather helms hopped out landing atop the firing steps, hell guns blazing.

One team amongst the storm troopers had brought a heavy flamer and began to pour gouts of fire down upon the aliens. The creatures screamed and fell back as flames reduced them to blackened bones and thrashing pyres.

Sparks bounced off the Valkyrie transport as it drew the attention of the orks and the moment the last storm trooper had leapt from the vehicle it started to rise into the sky and veer away. Shots danced along the flyer's hull leaving smoking holes while chunks of metal fell, torn off by the onslaught of gunfire.

One of the Valkyrie's engines burst apart; smoke and fire poured from the wounded flyer. Wounded and wobbling it flew back towards the slab, leaving a trail of inky black while the armored storm troopers held the faltering line.

Sheer fired off his last round and sunk to one knee exhausted. He leaned upon Jagg who in turn slumped over the heavy stubber. He was sure it was burning him, but he couldn't feel a thing. Armored soldiers blasted away with their hell guns sending out steams of red death that punched into ork flesh, while flamer fire drove them back in hellish sweeps. Even the walking tin can threatening the line was overwhelmed as a gout of super-heated flame washed over it, setting the construct aflame. It continued to attack the wall and only gradually came to a halt as the pilot within finally cooked to death.

The wreck of the can remained leaning against the wall the flames dancing around its hull cast a wide glow, illuminating the battle-zone. Corpses, burnt out machines, and crumbling masonry made for a memorable sight.

"They're pulling back. The Emperor protects. Oh, my!" Sheer said as he rested his head against Jagg's arm. Jagg found a lethargy coming over him, drugs and the shock of survival was swiftly setting in.

Jagg could see through the flames and smoke orks breaking apart and falling back leaving in their wake a mountain of bodies which were stacked so high as to reach the very top of the rockrete wall. Scattered about were the remains of ork vehicles. Some were wedged against the wall itself, others abandoned in the field, and another was rolling backwards firing as it fled into the safety of night.

The glory-boys were not done though and they swept their weapons into the dead bodies, firing at anything that so much as moved. When it

was over and silence hit the field, the storm-troopers left without a word walking back across the slab, their job done. They had saved the line. Just as the civilians of Jendra had been used to stall for time, so too had First and Second Platoon been used to thin the ork numbers just enough. Enough so that the storm troopers could clinch the victory.

Jagg's eyelids felt heavy and he wished he could feel relief, or satisfaction. He was bemused that all he felt was tired and somehow cheated by the storm troopers. He and the rest of the men had held the line to literally the last round; only for the glory boys to fly in and save the day?

Bast*rds. It was unfair. Anticlimactic. Not like the vid-picts back home. He looked at Sheer who panted and was streaked with soot, as well as his own blood. Jagg patted the heavy stubber and shut his eyes as the drugs in his system overwhelmed him.

"Me got."

Jagg awoke in a cot inside a structure lit by bright artificial lights in the ceiling that reminded the young man of home. His face and arm were sore and as he tried to move he could feel that both were bandaged. Leaning up Jagg saw that he was in a room full of cots and wounded men groaning or sleeping. Jagg's head still spun and he saw a figure in black moving down the line.

"Self inflicted. Rather easy to see."

"No wa-"

A laspistol round startled Jagg and he looked up to see the Regimental Commissar, his weapon lowering after he had put a blast into some unfortunate trooper's head.

Medicae staff hung back from the commissar and though they had angry looks on their faces, they did nothing to stop him with his summary execution.

The Commissar turned and his coat spun as he walked down the line while an adjunct read off a name from a data-slate. It was his name.

Jagg could only blink when the towering, clean shaven, agent of Imperial morale and battlefield justice stood before his cot.

"Achim Jagg?" he intoned, to which Jagg dumbly nodded.

"I have a report here that says you did not return alive from a night mission. Then on the next day you were listed as alive, not dead. Desertion will not be tolerated. I see you've redeemed yourself by the manner of your wounds, but a crime is a crime. Punishment is punishment and though retribution is not immediate in times of crisis, it always comes." He leveled the muzzle of the still smoking weapon.

Jagg did not feel fear to his own surprise. Orks caused fear, eldar and their inhumanity caused fear. Big maniac war machines caused fear and usually a commissar would as well, but in this case Jagg felt only a detached sense

of annoyance. While life was notoriously unfair, this bordered on lunacy. Was the game of life really that fixed?


"Oh, hello, Commissar Razin. Decorating young Jagg here?" where Leutnant von Zietdel had come from was beyond Jagg, the man simply appeared at his side. The small officer was dressed in a clean uniform, his moustache a bit thicker but still a brilliant shade of blonde.

"Executing, Leutnant. According to your own records this trooper didn't return from the night mission against the ork war boss. Then I have him listed as alive by his sergeant. I didn't want to dispense with justice till such a time as was convenient. That time being now given we are about to leave this position. So, if you'll excuse me?"

The commissar managed a thin smile before looking back to Jagg, "Now then. Nothing personal."

"Oh dear, oh dear. I've seemed to have made a mistake. This boy was at my very side that night. I must have put in the wrong name. Let me see that data-slate." Von Zietdel took the slate from the Commissar's assistant and hummed to himself as he looked it over.

He then sighed, "Indeed, my apologies. Poor paperwork on my part, Commissar Razin. I put down the wrong name. It wasn't Jagg here who went missing. Quite impossible. Oh, no! Are you going to have to execute me now for that mistake? Well these things happen I know, nothing personal and all that-"

The grim commissar's lips pursed and he holstered his weapon. "No, Leutnant. I don't shoot officers, with noble blood, for sloppy paperwork; though I shall report your error to the Hauptman. But justice will be done, Leutnant. If it was not this trooper who went missing for a time and deserted, then who was it? 

Von Zietdel smiled once and looked directly into the Commissar s eyes.

"Who? Oh. Klyst. Our former heavy stubber operator."

"Former?"

"The Emperor sometimes delivers justice even before you do Commissar. That deserter was shot in the head during the last battle by orks. Makes it easier for you I'm sure. Less paperwork."

The Commissar nodded curtly and swept past the cots and out of Jagg's sight.

Jagg stared at von Zietdel and nodded a slow thanks.

"Oh, think nothing of it my boy! If you really deserted that night and didn't get lost as Sergeant Taubover informed me, I'd have let the man shoot you. But we can't have an eager commissar killing off our good soldiers now can we? Well, I just happened to be about, but I have work to do don't you know!" Von Zietdel offered a crooked smile and walked off leaving Jagg alone.

He rested there a long while, ate and drank when the medicae staff told him to, asked questions and received few answers.

"Wake up. Come on soldier, they said you're fit enough to walk. Wake up."

Jagg heard Taubover's words then opened his eyes to see the sergeant looming over him. The man's eyes were gray as storm clouds his face clean shaven, his uniform spotless where Jagg last saw it, it had been coated in dust and blood.

The sergeant smiled and stepped back as he said, "We're being rotated out. We've done our bit. I need you mobile, we are to secure a rather small village well within our zone of control. Meaning it will be ork infested."

"Zone of control? Sergeant? How long have I been-"

"Some time," Taubover replied. "You took shrapnel to the face and arm, and rather than lie about like a good wounded man, you kept manning that heavy stubber. You've made the medicae staff earn their ration cards and you'll live with only some nice scars to your head and face to remind you of the day you thought it would be fun to play hero."

"I'll catch you up to speed, since you are always so damned curious. We held off the orks. A hard fight but we did it. They took their time regrouping over the next few days and by then our friends arrived. Three whole damned Death Korps regiments. A general from Krieg itself is on the way. The likes of that hasn't been seen since the civil war. The Ork Rok is done for, space and sky is ours, and we've secured Kynder. Rest of the continent needs liberating, and the Emperor knows the rest of the planet is still well frickered."

Jagg's mind boggled. How long had he been out?!

"So what now, Sergeant?"

"For us? Like I said, you get on your feet. The 76th is moving out to a place to lick our wounds and reorganize. After that, we go ork hunting. The Field-Marshal of this fine army hasn't arrived yet. Kapitän von Gotslieb wants to send the orks reeling before he arrives. Make a good

impression eh? We find orks, we kill them. You shouldn't worry about it. Take things easy. Small steps."

Jagg nodded and sniffed once, "The others? Sergeant, I saw Klyst get it. Anyone else?"

"No. First and Second Platoon are in a bad way, but our section got off easy. Klyst is gone," He sighed. The worn out Taubover sniffed and pointed to the cots. "Sheer is in some other cot, the fate of all heroes eh? I'll be telling him the same I've told you. Callum took a cut, but it wasn't bad. Everyone else is beat up but alive. We've got seven men left in a section that is supposed to have ten. I'm moving Sheer to heavy stubber, Callum to ammo bearer, and keeping everyone else as is. Any other questions, trooper?" Taubover cracked his neck and gave Jagg a dubious look.

"No, Sergeant. No."

He inwardly thanked the Emperor that his friends, and yes even Callum was his friend, were alive. He felt a little loss for Klyst, but not much. He hardly knew him, just as he hardly knew any of the veterans.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Pile of ration cards for you. They'll open up a Regimental store. Re-equip, get food, drink, and don't waste any of it. Those damn cards come rather sporadically." He reached into his tunic and produced a stack of yellow cards littered with Low Gothic script.

In the Death Korps the cards were to be used for everything, when one didn't want to barter away gear or lho-sticks. Taubover handed the stack to Jagg who winced as he tried to take it with his wounded arm, and instead took it with his left hand.

When Taubover left, Jagg sorted through the cards. They automatically deducted him per week on what the Death Korps reasoned an average trooper cost for rations, equipment and other items. Jagg bit his lower lip and noted that there was a deduction under spouse of what he believed was a rather small amount. His average ration consumption per week cost more than she did.

Anticipation, similar to the way he felt before battle, filled him. Jagg sorted through the cards, week by week and upon each one noted the deduction for spouse. The amount remained the same for each card till the eighth.

"Bloody hell, I'm going to be a father."

With a little assistance from the medicae Jagg was able to walk, shower outside under a water tank, dress, fetch what kit had been left at the foot of his cot, and make his way from the medical station. Medicae staff tending to the wounded gave him directions on where to meet up with his kompanie and from there he could find his platoon and section.

Outside, Jagg found himself in Jendra IV's noon day sun, somewhere deep inside the city of Kynder itself. Low buildings along grid pattern streets were everywhere, most bearing some form of war damage.

A collapsed building here, one with a shell hole there, another whose walls were chipped and worn from small arms fire.

Charcoal clad soldiers meandered down the streets and haulers blared their horns trying to clear people out of the way as they sped past. It was an organized chaos Jagg knew well. He made his way through the throng of troopers and recognized none of them. Many were just boys he thought then grinned remembering he himself was the same age as them most likely. Only they didn't have the look of someone who had been at war. Some Jagg noticed must have just arrived to Kynder for they wore their full kit, storm-coats included, unlike Jagg who had but his tunic on, a helmet at his waist and a sack over his shoulder. He wasn't sure who had left a lasgun for him, and he doubted it was the same one he had lost at the entrenchments, but he was thankful and kept it slung across his back.

Civilians shied away, and Jagg saw few signs of Jendra IV's people except for the occasional PDF soldier manually pushing a cart of supplies or directing traffic. What very few glimpses he caught of the native people were fleeting and none to positive. They would meet his stare, glare then look away. Ungrateful bast*rds.

By foot Jagg walked his way through the mass of soldiers and flagged down a wheeled transport that bore the markings of the 76th Regiment. The driver was only too happy to let a fellow member of the 76th share his cab. The old soldier didn't talk much, just enough to give his name, Jygel, or something like that and make a few comments about Jagg's wounds.

"Took a bit to the head and face I see. Can right scramble a man."

Jagg could only agree.

As the transport left Kynder Jagg looked out across the land. It was black and burnt, though here and there a few shoots of the golden grass were cropping back up. The planet was resilient. Engineered for food and growth, and burnt soil wasn't an issue. The sky had returned to a vibrant blue and the sun shone without the usual haze of sooty smoke blotting it out. There was a war on but Jagg could not figure out precisely where it was.

When their transport made it to the camp outside the city of Kynder, Jagg felt some relief. This was as close to home as anything was. Sentries checked their ident-tags and Jagg hopped from the transport with a nod. He winced a bit as he felt pain in his arm. A few quick questions led him to a tent reserved for his entire section.

It was high summer and hot, and like exhausted beasts of burden, the men of section four slept in standard issue cots. There were ten cots total and Sergeant Taubover was not present.

"Hello," was the only thing Jagg could come up with lacking any sense of wit at the moment.

Kellen Raous and Callum leaned up in their cots both smiling wide. They looked clean and shaven, hardly a mark of their ordeal about them except for an aspect of gauntness everyone had taken on.

Lufsen and Grieg leaned up from their olive drab cots, offered small nods and promptly laid back down shutting their eyes. Sheer was back at the medical station, somewhere, and Klyst wasn't coming back at all.


"We visited you, twice before they sent us out here. You took some shrapnel to the head I think. You hardly made any sense," Kellen said and hopped out of his cot to shake Jagg's good hand.

Callum rose as well and nodded, shaking Jagg's hand and offering a quick slightly sheepish smile, "We were worried you wouldn't make it. Lufsen there pulled out most the obvious shrapnel but you had bits in your skull. Raous wanted to save a piece of it for you but the medicae chased us out. They didn't tell us much."

"How long have I been out of it?" Jagg wondered aloud.

"Days and days. It's hard to keep track. You missed the reinforcements arriving. Oh, what a sight that was, Achim. Men of Krieg landing all over the starport, outside it, just everywhere. Navy boys doing their thing. Big artillery. I mean real big stuff. It sent the orks far from our lines. Kynder's safe and a good zone about it is under our control. I hear we are to be an army. An Army of Krieg, and a Field-Marshal is on his way!" Kellen Raous used hand gestures to better explain what it was he saw.

"We get a few days rest, and then I hear we are on the offensive," Callum added.

"I ll enjoy the rest," Jagg said and made his way to an empty cot and began to set his things down. "Oh. I'm a father." Jagg could not help but offer a wide smile to his companions.

"You too? That's three for three! We should celebrate. I think I can get my hands on some amasec." Kellen rubbed his hands together eagerly and his smile broadened.

"What's amasec?" Jagg looked at Kellen's smile and Callum's frown.

Grieg snorted from his cot.

Callum smiled. "Like lho sticks but you drink it. Sergeant Taubover gave us all a bottle to share. Feels great, till morning. I don't think you'll catch me with the stuff again. But you two enjoy and suffer by all means." Callum waved his hands wide.

"Enjoy it while you can, children," Lufsen said from his cot.

"Soldiers. Enjoy it while you can soldiers," Grieg corrected and leaned up. "You are soldiers now. These good times are quick. They don't come up often enough. I'll get you men some amasec soon enough. We'll drink to your babies, our sons, and Klyst. Maybe to Sheer as well if he doesn't make it."

"He probably wont," Lufsen said quietly.

"Eh, you said the same about Jagg over there and he looks fine. Well, save for the bandages and funny look in his eye." Grieg scratched his head and slid out of the cot.

"Come on soldiers, let me introduce you to the 76th's unofficial quartermaster. He doesn't accept ration cards, so get your lho sticks ready."

Grudgingly Lufsen joined them and together they exited the tent to find a way to make the passing of time more enjoyable. The day was not young and night was coming. The war was over for them, but only for the moment. Jagg fished through his kit for a pack of lho sticks, battlefield currency, and as he palmed a pack he paused. He held the foil wrapped pack up, remembering that someone he hardly knew was no longer smoking the things. Jagg smiled faintly thinking of his wife.

"Klara," he said.

XI

High Summer

The 76th Regiment of Krieg had assembled outside the village by ranks in section. They were dressed for Jendra IV's hot high-summer period. The men wore their tunics with the sleeves rolled up, and carried on their backs only the bare essentials. No masks, no gloves, no storm-coats.

Even the vehicles of the 76th had been brought forth for parade, their once deep gray paint replaced by a golden tan hue, camouflaged with browns, greens and dappled black dots. Not all of the vehicles were standard issue. The 76th lacked the means to mechanize all of its foot soldiers; there

simply weren't enough Chimera tanks to go about. To make do civilian transports had been pressed into service. Not always voluntarily. What a month ago carted foodstuffs for locals now carted soldiers and supplies to the front.

Standing atop a command Chimera, laden with communication equipment, Jagg made out the figure of Kapitän von Gotslieb. He was easier to see than he ever had been before, but was still too far away to make out finer details. Jagg imagined the regiment's commander was a physically strong man. His stance was wide and confident, his hands were planted upon his hips and his opened tunic revealed a white undershirt as well as medals from past deeds of glory. The Regiment's Kapitän wore a visored cap, cocked to one side, casting his eyes in shadow.

"Men of Krieg!" von Gotslieb loudly roared.

"SIR!" The 76th Regiment answered together and came to attention. Thousands of heels clicked as one. It was as loud as a gunshot.

"We were dumped on this ball of grass to fight eldar. Lucky for them, orks showed up. We'll kill the eldar another day, for today we hunt orks!"

The men cheered and even Jagg felt some excitement at the prospect of being on the offensive; of finding the enemy and letting them have a taste of what it was like to be hiding behind walls with nowhere else to go.

"We have rested and are now ready to embark on something historic, something that has not been seen in a long time. Long before my birth the last time this many soldiers of Krieg stood side by side, was in a war against one another. Today we stand side by side, all loyal men of Krieg, all loyal servants of the Emperor! For the first time since our shame a whole army of Krieg is on the march. For the first time in a thousand years every soldier you'll find is a brother, from the trooper to the Field-Marshal.

"No outsider rules us, no weak-willed appointee. No! For the first time Krieg has its own war. Redemption will be found here! Or more to say, there!" the Kapitän pointed out ahead of his Chimera across a sea of

golden grass, and far in the distance the rising black smoke of war could be seen, its inky tendrils beckoning the soldiers.

Soldiers cheered and Jagg joined them. The men in his section jostled him in their excitement and growing agitation.

"Out there the orks await us. I for one, am not going to let a few hundred thousand warlike alien barbarians stand between me and earning for Krieg its shining place in history. I plan on being down their ugly throats before our glorious Field-Marshal even gets planetside! But I must ask. What would you do if you were in my shoes? Forward or back?" the Kapitän smiled and moved to climb into his command Chimera's open cupola.

"Forward! Forward! Forward!" the 76th Regiment chanted.

Jagg yelled with them, "Forward! Forward! Forward!" raising his fist into the air.

It was going to feel good giving it back to the orks. It was a change of pace that he eagerly awaited. To go forward! When the Man of Krieg who bore the title Field-Marshal arrived, he was going to be proud to learn that the regiment which first touched down on the planet, was the very same that had taken the fight into the heart of the orks. Indeed, it was time to go forward; for Krieg!